



PROFESSOR BORGES

A COURSE
ON ENGLISH LITERATURE

Edited by Martín Arias and Martín Hadis

PROFESSOR BORGES

A COURSE ON
ENGLISH LITERATURE

JORGE LUIS BORGES

EDITED, RESEARCHED, AND ANNOTATED
MARTÍN ARIAS AND MARTÍN HADIS
TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH BY KATHERINE SILVER

A NEW DIRECTIONS BOOK

TABLE OF CONTENTS

[ABOUT THIS BOOK](#)

[CLASS 1](#) *The Anglo-Saxons. Genealogy of the Germanic kings. Poetry and kennings.*

[CLASS 2](#) *Beowulf. Description of the Germans. Ancient funeral rites.*

[CLASS 3](#) *Beowulf. Bravery and boastfulness: Beowulf as compared to the compadritos.*

[CLASS 4](#) *The Finnsburh Fragment. The Vikings. Anecdotes from Borges's trip to York. "The Battle of Brunanburh." Tennyson's translation.*

[CLASS 5](#) *"The Battle of Maldon." Christian poetry. "Caedmon's Hymn." The runic alphabet. Characteristics of Anglo-Saxon elegies.*

[CLASS 6](#) *The origins of poetry in England. The Anglo-Saxon elegies. Christian poetry: "The Dream of the Rood."*

[CLASS 7](#) *The two books written by God. The Anglo-Saxon bestiary. Riddles. "The Grave." The Battle of Hastings.*

[CLASS 8](#) *A brief history until the eighteenth century. The life of Samuel Johnson.*

CLASS 9 *Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia, by Samuel Johnson. The legend of the Buddha. Optimism and pessimism. Leibniz and Voltaire.*

CLASS 10 *Samuel Johnson as seen by Boswell. The art of biography. Boswell and his critics.*

CLASS 11 *The romantic movement. The life of James Macpherson. The invention of Ossian. Opinions about Ossian. Polemic with Johnson. Reappraisal of Macpherson.*

CLASS 12 *Life of William Wordsworth. The Prelude and other poems.*

CLASS 13 *The life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. A story by Henry James. Coleridge and Macedonio Fernández, compared. Coleridge and Shakespeare. In Cold Blood, by Truman Capote.*

CLASS 14 *Coleridge's final years. Coleridge compared to Dante Alighieri. Coleridge's poems. "Kubla Khan." Coleridge's dream.*

CLASS 15 *The life of William Blake. The poem "The Tyger." Blake and Swedenborg's philosophy, compared. A poem by Rupert Brooke. Blake's poems.*

CLASS 16 *Life of Thomas Carlyle. Sartor Resartus by Carlyle. Carlyle, precursor of Nazism. Bolívar's soldiers, according to Carlyle.*

CLASS 17 *The Victorian era. The life of Charles Dickens. The novels of Charles Dickens. William Wilkie Collins. The Mystery of Edwin Drood, by Dickens.*

CLASS 18 *The life of Robert Browning. The obscurity of his work. His poems.*

CLASS 19 *Robert Browning's poems. A chat with Alfonso Reyes. The Ring and the Book.*

CLASS 20 *The life of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Evaluation of Rossetti as a poet and a painter. The theme of the double (fetch). A book of exhumed poems. Rossetti's poems. History cyclically repeated.*

CLASS 21 *Rossetti's poem. Rossetti as seen by Max Nordau. "The Blessed Damozel," "Eden Bower," and "Troy Town."*

CLASS 22 *The life of William Morris. The three subjects worthy of poetry. King Arthur and the myth of the return of the hero. Morris's interests. Morris and Chaucer. "The Defence of Guenevere."*

CLASS 23 *"The Tune of the Seven Towers," "The Sailing of the Sword," and The Earthly Paradise, by William Morris. The Icelandic sagas. The story of Gunnar.*

CLASS 24 *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung, by William Morris. The life of Robert Louis Stevenson.*

CLASS 25 *The works of Robert Louis Stevenson: New Arabian Nights, "Markheim," The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Jekyll and Hyde in the movies. The Picture of Dorian Gray, by Oscar Wilde. "Requiem," by Stevenson.*

EPILOGUE

AFTERWORD, by Martín Arias

BORGES IN CLASS, by Martín Hadis

ENDNOTES

INDEX

“I know, or rather I’ve been told because I cannot see, that more and more students keep coming to my classes, and that many of them are not even registered. So, I guess we can assume they want to listen to me, right?”

Jorge Luis Borges, interview with B.D., 1968,
published in *Clarín* on December 7, 1989

Citations from *Literaturas germánicas medievales* [Medieval Germanic Literature] and *Breve antología anglosajona* [Brief Anglo-Saxon Anthology] refer to the 1997 edition of *Obras completas en colaboración* [Complete Collaborative Works] (OCC) published by Emecé Editores.

Other citations from other works by Borges refer to the edition of his *Obras completas* [Complete Works] (OC), published by Emecé Editores in Buenos Aires in 1997.

When a chapter number of a saga is indicated in a note, this always corresponds to the edition that appears in the Bibliography, at the end of this volume.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: In certain passages, we have retained Borges's translations into Spanish of poetry originally written in English. We have added alongside, in brackets, the corresponding lines of the English original except when those lines appear in the text nearby.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

These classes were recorded by a small group of students of English literature so that other students, who couldn't attend class because they were working, would be able to study the material. The transcriptions of these recordings, produced by the same students, form the basis of this book.

The tapes have been lost; they were probably used to tape other classes, in other subjects. Such carelessness might seem unpardonable to us today. However, we need to understand that in 1966—the year these lectures were given—Jorge Luis Borges was not yet considered the indisputable genius he is today. With the constant political changes in Argentina, his statements about current events received more publicity than his literary work. For many of the students in his class, Borges—though an eminent writer and director of the National Library—must have simply been one more professor. The transcriptions of the classes, therefore, were made for the purposes of studying the material, and were probably done quickly in order to prepare for the exam.

We might, in fact, be grateful for this: there was no attempt to modify Borges's spoken language, nor edit his sentences, which have reached us intact with their repetitions and their platitudes. This fidelity can be verified by comparing Borges's language here with that of other texts of his oral discourse, such as his many lectures and published interviews. The transcribers also made certain to note under the transcription of each class the phrase: "A faithful version." This faithfulness was maintained, fortunately, not only in Borges's discourse, but also in asides and colloquialisms the professor used to address his students.

On the other hand, due to the transcribers' rush and lack of scholarship, each proper name, title, or foreign phrase was written phonetically such that most of the names

of the authors and titles of the works were written wrong; the recitations in Anglo-Saxon and English, as well as etymological digressions, were completely illegible in the original transcriptions.

Every single one of the names appearing in the text had to be checked. It was not difficult to figure out that “Roseti” was Dante Gabriel Rossetti. It took considerably longer, however, to puzzle out that “Wado Thoubé” was, in fact, the poet Robert Southey, or that the transcriber had written “Bartle” at each mention of the philosopher George Berkeley. Many of these names required laborious searches. Such was the case of the Jesuit from the eighteenth century, Martino Dobrizhoffer—who appeared in the original as “Edoverick Hoffer”—or of Professor Livingston Lowes, whose name was transcribed as if it were the title of a book, “Lyrics and Lows.”

The transcribers’ lack of familiarity with the literary texts under discussion was obvious on many occasions. Names as well known as those of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde appear in the original with strange spellings, threatening to turn the terrible duality of the character into a multiplicity. For example, Dr. Jekyll is “Jaquil,” “Shekli,” “Shake,” “Sheke,” and “Shakel,” whereas Mr. Hyde is “Hi,” “Hid,” and “Hait,” variations that sometimes appear on the same page and even in the same paragraph. It was often difficult to determine if all the variations referred to the same person. Hence, the hero Hengest appears in one line with the correct spelling, but in the next he’s turned into “Heinrich”; the philosopher Spengler is hiding behind the names “Stendler,” “Spendler,” or even further removed, “Schomber.”

Borges’s poetic citations were equally illegible. Some, once revealed, turned out to be comic. Perhaps the most significant of these was the line from *Leaves of Grass*: “Walt Whitman, un cosmos, hijo de Manhattan” [“Walt Whitman, a cosmos, of Manhattan the son”] appears in the original transcription as “Walt Whitman, un cojo, hijo de Manhattan”

[“Walt Whitman, a gimp, of Manhattan the son”], a variation that surely would have disturbed the poet.

During his classes, Borges often asked his students to lend him their eyes and their voices to read poems out loud. As the student read, Borges would comment on each stanza. In the original transcription, however, the poems recited by the students were removed. In their absence, Borges’s comments on the stanzas appeared one on top of the other and were wholly indecipherable. In order to restore coherence to these classes, the recited stanzas were found, and Borges’s commentaries were interspersed through a truly laborious editing and reassembling task.

Such work required the restitution of quotes in Old English that had been transcribed phonetically from the original. Though seriously distorted, these were recognizable and were replaced with the original texts.

Punctuation in Borges’s text, inconsistent in the quick, original transcription, had to be completely changed, always with the goal of following the rhythm of the spoken presentation.

This edition required the correction of all possible facts, fixing errors of transcription and making the necessary corrections. The original sources of most of the texts were found, and endnotes were added, offering the poems in their original languages (if they were brief) or in fragments.

In some cases, for the sake of the reader, certain minor changes were necessary:

1. Missing words were added (conjunctions, prepositions, etcetera) that Borges surely spoke, despite their absence in the original transcription.
2. Other conjunctions used in spoken language, but that made comprehension of the written text more difficult, were eliminated.
3. In a few places, it was necessary to bring a subject and verb closer together where Borges’s enthusiasm led him into a long digression—a practice that is

acceptable in spoken language, but in a written text, the thread of discourse is completely lost. The order of phrases in a sentence was changed around, but without omitting a single spoken word.

As none of these changes altered the words or the essence of Borges's discourse, we preferred not to indicate when this was done, so as to avoid disturbing the reader. On other occasions, words *not* spoken by Borges were added to the text in brackets to facilitate comprehension.

The endnotes mostly supply information about works, people, or events in order to enrich the reading of these classes. We mostly resisted the temptation to link subjects in these classes with the rest of Borges's oeuvre. The relationship between Borges the writer and Borges the teacher is so close that it would require an almost infinite quantity of notes; moreover, our goal has not been to carry out a critique or an analysis of the text.

Many of the notes are brief biographies; the relative length of each does not reflect our judgment as to the value of the person or thing, but rather, in most cases, was determined by two factors: 1) how unknown a particular reference might be, and 2) its relevance within the context of the class. Hence, Ulfilas, the Gothic minister, and Snorri Sturluson, the Icelandic historian, receive a few lines; while those figures who are more recent or well known—or only mentioned in passing—have notes containing only their dates, nationality, and a few facts that allow for easy identification.

The reader will find that many of these short biographical notes correspond to famous figures, but that does not mean that we assume the reader is not familiar them. The presence of these notes allows the reader to situate these figures historically, this in consideration of the liberty with which Borges leaps from century to century, continent to continent, contrasting and comparing.

We don't know if Borges knew about the existence of these transcriptions; we are, nevertheless, certain that he would be pleased to know that these pages carry on his work as a teacher. A limitless number of readers can now join all those students to whom Borges taught English literature for many years with dedication and affection.

We hope the reader enjoys reading this book as much as we enjoyed editing it.

MARTÍN ARIAS

MARTÍN HADIS

Buenos Aires, February, 2000

CLASS 1

THE ANGLO-SAXONS. GENEALOGY OF THE GERMANIC KINGS. POETRY AND KENNINGS.

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 14, 1966

English literature starts to develop at the end of the seventh or the beginning of the eighth century. The first works we have come from that era, predating any from any other European literature. In these first two units, we will discuss this literature: Anglo-Saxon poetry and prose. In order to learn the material in these classes, it would be helpful for you to consult a book I wrote with Ms. Vázquez called *Literaturas germánicas medievales* [*Medieval Germanic Literatures*].¹ It was published by Editorial Falbo. Before continuing, I would like to make clear that this course will be undertaken from the standpoint of literature, with references made to the economic, political, and social context only when necessary for the understanding of the texts.

Let us begin this first class, then, in which we will discuss epic poetry and the Anglo-Saxons, who arrived in the British Isles after the departure of the Roman legions. We are talking about the fifth century, the year 449, approximately. The British Isles were Rome's remotest colony, the one farthest to the north, and it had been conquered all the way to Caledonia, part of present-day Scotland, which was inhabited by the Picts, a people of Celtic origin separated from the rest of Britain by Hadrian's Wall. To the south lived the Celts, who had converted to

Christianity, and the Romans. In the cities, educated people spoke Latin; the lower classes spoke various Gaelic dialects. The Celts were a people who lived in the regions of Iberia, Switzerland, Tirol, Belgium, France—and Britain. Their mythology was wiped out by the Romans and the barbarian invasions, except in Wales and Ireland, where some remnants of it were preserved.

In the year 449, Rome collapses and its legions withdraw from Britain. This was an extremely important event because the country was left without the defenses it had counted on and was vulnerable to attacks by the Picts from the north and the Saxons from the east. The Saxons were thought of as a confederation of marauding tribes, for Tacitus does not refer to them as a “people” in his *Germania*. They were “of North-Sea Germanic stock,” and were related to the Vikings, who came later. They inhabited the Lower Rhine region and the Low Countries. The Anglos inhabited southern Denmark, and the Jutes, as their name indicates, lived in Jutland. And so it happened that a Celtic chieftain, a Britain, upon seeing that the south and the west were being threatened by marauders, realized he could pit them against each other. To this end, he summoned the Jutes to help him in his struggle against the Picts. And that’s when two Germanic chieftains arrive: Hengest, whose name means “stallion,” and Horsa, whose name means “mare.”²

“Germanic,” then, is the generic designation of a group of tribes, each with a different ruler, who spoke similar dialects, out of which came modern Danish, German, English, etcetera. They shared some of the same mythologies, though only the Norse one has survived, and then only in the remotest part of Europe: Iceland. We know of certain connections between them from the mythology preserved in the *Eddas*: for example, that the Norse god Odin was the German Wotan and the English Woden.³ The names of the gods have persisted in the names of the days of the week, which were translated from Latin to Old English:

Monday is the day of the moon. The day of Mars, Tuesday, is the day of the Germanic god of war and glory. The day of Mercury became the day of Woden in Wednesday. The day of Jove became Thursday, day of Thor, with his Norse name. Friday is the day of Venus, the goddess of beauty; in German it's *Frija*, and *Frig* in England. Saturday is the day of Saturn. The Lord's day—*domingo* [in Spanish], and in Italian *domenica*—remained the day of the sun, Sunday.

Very little of Anglo-Saxon mythology has been preserved. We know that the Norsemen worshipped the valkyries—warrior goddesses who could fly and who carried the souls of dead warriors to paradise; we also know that these were worshipped in England, thanks to a trial held in the ninth century of an old woman accused of being a valkyrie. In other words, Christianity changed these warrior women who carried the dead to paradise on their flying horses into witches. The old gods were commonly interpreted as devils.

Although the Germanic peoples were not politically unified, they did acknowledge unity of a different kind: national unity. Thus foreigners were called *wealh*, which becomes "Welsh" in English, and means "the people from Wales," *galeses* [in Spanish]. This word also remains in the word "Galicia," or *galo* [in Spanish]. That is, the name was used for anyone who was not German. . . . So, the Celtic chieftain Vortigern summoned the Picts to help him, but when they launched their oar-driven boats—they didn't have sails—and they landed in Kent County, the Celts immediately waged war and defeated them quite easily. So easily, in fact, that they decided to invade their entire country. This cannot really be called an armed invasion, because the conquest was carried out almost peacefully. Immediately thereafter the first Germanic kingdom of England is formed, with Hengest as its ruler. Thereafter, many other small kingdoms were formed. At the same time, the Germans were abandoning, en masse, the southern regions of Denmark and Jutland, and founding Northumbria,

Wessex, Bernicia. This entire assortment of small kingdoms converted to Christianity one century later as a result of the efforts of monks who hailed from Rome and Ireland. These efforts, at first complementary, soon grew into rivalries between the monks from those two places. There are several interesting aspects of this spiritual conquest, the first being the way the pagans accepted Christ. The Venerable Bede tells of a king who had two altars: one devoted to Christ and the other to the devils.⁴ These devils were, without a doubt, the Germanic gods.

Here we come to another problem. The Germanic kings were direct descendents of their gods. And a chieftain could not be prohibited from paying homage to his ancestors. Thus, the Christian priests, whose responsibility it was to record the genealogies of the kings—some of which have been passed on to us—found themselves in the dilemma of not wanting to contradict the kings and, at the same time, not refute the Bible. The solution they came up with was really very curious. We must realize that for the ancients the past did not extend beyond fifteen or twenty generations: they could not conceive of a past as long as we do. So, after several generations, we come to a kinship with the gods, who in turn are related to the Hebrew patriarchs. Hence, for example, we have Odin's great-grandfather, the nephew of one of the patriarchs. And from there, it is a direct line to Adam. At the most, their concept of the past extended to fifteen generations, or a bit more.

The literature of these peoples spans many centuries, and most of it has been lost. Because of the Venerable Bede, we date its beginnings to around the middle of the fifth century. And from the year 449 until 1066, the Battle of Hastings, out of this entire period, there remain only four main codices and a few other bits.⁵ The first codex, the *Vercelli Book*, was discovered in the monastery of the same name in the north of Italy in the last century. It is a notebook written in Anglo-Saxon, assumed to have been brought

there by English pilgrims on their way back from Rome, and who, fortunately for us, forgot the manuscript in the convent. There are other codices: *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, a translation of Boethius, one of Orosius, laws, and *Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*.⁶ And that is all. Then come the epic poems. The famous *Beowulf*, a composition of a little fewer than 3,200 lines, suggests, perhaps, that there were other epic poems that vanished. But they are all completely hypothetical. Moreover, considering that the epic poem appears after the proliferation of short cantos and arises from them, it is also reasonable to believe that that one is unique.

In every instance, poetry comes before prose. It seems that man sings before he speaks. But there are other very important reasons for this. A verse, once composed, serves as a model. It is repeated over and over again, and then we have a poem. Prose, on the other hand, is much more complex, and requires a greater effort. Moreover, we must not forget the mnemonic value of verse. Thus, in India, the codices are written in verse.⁷ I assume they must have some poetic value; this is not why they were written in verse, but rather because in that form it was easier to remember them.

We must look closely at what we mean by “verse.” This word has a very elastic meaning. It is not the same concept for all peoples in all eras. For example, we think of rhymed and isosyllabic verse; the Greeks thought of sung verse, noted for its parallel structures, for its phrases that balanced one another. Germanic verse is nothing like this. It was difficult to discover the rules that determine how these verses were constructed, because in the codices the lines aren’t written—as are ours—one under the other, but rather continuously. Moreover, they have no punctuation. But finally, it was discovered that each line has three words whose first syllables are stressed and that they are alliterated. Rhymes have also been found, but these are accidental: those who listened to this poetry probably didn’t

hear them. And I say those who listened because these poems were meant to be read or sung, accompanied by a harp. There is a Germanist who says that alliterated verse has the advantage of forming a unit. But we must mention here its disadvantage, which is that it does not allow for stanzas. Indeed, if we hear a rhyme in Spanish, we are led to expect a conclusion; that is, if a four-line stanza's first line ends in *-ía*, followed by two verses ending in *-aba*, we expect the fourth line to also end in *-ía*. But this does not happen with alliteration. After several verses, the sound of the first one, for example, has vanished from our minds, and hence the sensation of the stanza disappears. Rhyming allows for lines to be grouped together.

Later, the Germanic poets discovered the refrain and used it infrequently. But poetry had developed another hierarchical poetic instrument: that is, kennings—descriptive, crystallized metaphors.⁸ Because poets were always talking about the same things, always dealing with the same themes—that is: spears, kings, swords, the earth, the sun—and as these were words that did not begin with the same letter, they had to find a solution. The only poetry that existed, as I have said, was epic poetry. (There was no erotic poetry. Love poetry would appear much later, in the ninth century, with the Anglo-Saxon elegiac poems.) For this poetry, which was only epic, they formed compound words to denote things whose names did not begin with the requisite letter. These kinds of formations are quite possible, and normal, in the Germanic languages. They realized that these compound words could very well be used as metaphors. In this way, they began to call the sea “whale-road,” “sail-road,” or “fish-bath”; they called the ship “sea-stallion” or “sea-stag” or “sea-boar,” always using the names of animals; as a general rule, they thought of the ship as a living being. The king was called “the people’s shepherd” and also—this surely for the minstrels’ sake, for their own benefit—“ring-giver.” These metaphors, some of which are

beautiful, were employed like clichés. Everybody used them, and everybody understood them.

In England, however, poets finally realized that these metaphors—some of which, I repeat, were very beautiful, like the one that called the bird the “summer guardian”—ended up hobbling poetry, so they were slowly abandoned. In Scandinavia, on the other hand, they carried them to their final stage: they created metaphors out of metaphors by using successive combinations. Thus, if a ship was “sea-horse” and the sea was “gull’s field,” then a ship would be “horse of the gull’s field.” And this could be called a metaphor of the first degree. As a shield was the “pirate’s moon”—shields were round and made of wood—and a spear was the “shield’s serpent,” for the spear could destroy the shield, that *spear* would be the “serpent of the pirate’s moon.”

This is how an extremely complicated and obscure poetry evolved. It is, of course, what happened in learned poetry, within the highest spheres of society. And, as these poems were recited or sung, it must be assumed that the primary metaphors, those that served as the foundation, were already familiar to the audience. Familiar, even very familiar, almost synonymous with the word itself. Be that as it may, the poetry became very obscure, so much so that finding the real meaning is like solving a puzzle. So much so that scribes from subsequent centuries show, in the transcriptions of these same poems we have now, that they did not understand them. Here’s a fairly simple kenning: “the swan of the beer of the dead,” which, when we first see it, we don’t now how to interpret. So, if we break it down, we see that “beer of the dead” means blood, and “swan of the blood” means the bird of death, the raven, so we see that “swan of the beer of the dead” simply means “raven.” And in Scandinavia, whole poems were written like this and with increasing complexity. But this did not happen in England. The metaphors remained in the first degree, without going any further.

As for the use of alliteration, it is interesting to note that a verse is considered alliterative even if it contains stressed words beginning with different vowels. If a verse contains a word with the vowel *a*, another with *e*, and another with *i*, they are alliterated. In fact, we cannot know exactly how the vowels were pronounced in Anglo-Saxon. Undoubtedly, Old English had a much more open sound and was more voiced than English is now. Now, in English, consonants serve as the high points of the syllables. On the contrary, Anglo-Saxon or Old English—these words are synonymous—was highly vocalic.⁹

Besides this, the Anglo-Saxon lexicon was completely Germanic. Before the Norman Conquest, the only other significant influence was the introduction of about five hundred words from Latin. These words were, for the most part, religious, or, if not religious, they named concepts that had not previously existed among those peoples.

As far as the religious conversion of the Germanic peoples, it is worth noting that being polytheistic, they had no problem accepting yet another god: one more is nothing. For us, for example, it would be rather difficult to accept polytheistic paganism. But for the Germanic peoples, it was not; at first Christ was merely a new god. The issue of conversion, moreover, presented few problems. Conversion was not, as it is now, an individual act; rather, if the king converted, the entire people converted.

The words that found a place in Anglo-Saxon, because they represented new concepts were, for example, ones like “emperor,” a notion they did not have. Even now, the German word *kaiser*, which means the same thing, comes from the Latin *caesar*. The Germanic peoples, in fact, knew Rome well. They acknowledged it as a superior culture and admired it. That is why conversion to Christianity meant conversion to a superior civilization; it had, without a doubt, incontrovertible appeal.

In the next class, we will look at *Beowulf*, a poem from the seventh century, the oldest epic poem, prior to “Song of

the Cid" from the ninth or tenth century, and *Chanson de Roland*, written a century before *Cid* and the *Nibelungenlied*.^{[10](#)} It is the oldest epic poem in all of European literature. We will then continue with the Finnsburh Fragment.

CLASS 2

BEOWULF. DESCRIPTION OF THE GERMANS. ANCIENT FUNERAL RITES

UNDATED, PROBABLY OCTOBER 15, 1966¹

In our last class, I said that today we would discuss the epic poem, *Beowulf*. As we shall see, the protagonist is a knight who embodies all the virtues held in high regard during the Middle Ages: loyalty, bravery—this is all in the book by the Venerable Bede. But let's dig into *Beowulf*. The name in itself is a metaphor that means “bee-wolf,” in other words “bear.” It is truly a long poem: it contains a little fewer than 3,200 lines, all of which follow the law of Germanic versification: alliteration. Its language is intricate; it makes constant use of what is called “hyper-baton,” that is, the alteration of the logical sequence of words in a sentence. We know this was not the usual form of the Germanic language, and much less so of its poetry, because another fragment that has been preserved, the Finnsburh Fragment, employs very direct language.

It was previously believed that the style of *Beowulf* belonged to a primitive, barbaric stage of poetic creation. Subsequently, however, a Germanist discovered that lines from the *Aeneid* were woven into the poem, and that elsewhere, passages from that epic poem were brought in, then interspersed in the text. Hence, we have realized that we are not dealing with a barbaric poem, but rather with the erudite, baroque experiment of a priest, that is, someone who had access to Latin texts, and who studied them.

The author took an ancient Germanic legend and turned it into an epic poem that follows the syntactic rules of Latin. Thanks to those few interpolated lines, we can see that the author set out to compose a German *Aeneid*. One clear indicator of this is the aforementioned contrast with the direct language used in the heroic Finnsburh Fragment and the other texts we have from that era (such as incantations, etcetera). But the author faced a problem in attempting to carry out his intention: according to the decorum of the time, he could not praise the pagan gods. In the eighth century, the pagan era was quite recent, and still very much alive among the populace. It was not until the seventeenth century, almost ten centuries later, that we see Góngora speak calmly, without qualms, about the pagan gods.² However, [the author of *Beowulf*] could not speak about Christ and the Virgin, either. The fact is, he never names them anywhere. But two concepts make their appearance, and we do not know if the author understood that they contradicted each other. The word “god” appears, as does *wyrd* or “fate.” Fate, in Germanic mythology, was a power greater than even the gods themselves. We know this from Norse mythology. *Wyrd* has survived in modern English: Shakespeare uses it in *Macbeth* to speak of the witches, though it probably did not have the same meaning. In any case, the word [in *Beowulf*] is not “witch,” but “emissary of fate,” “weird sister,” “sister of fate.”³ Throughout *Beowulf*, the concepts of God—the new God, and the old one, the one of *wyrd*—are woven into the text and used indiscriminately.

The Germanist Ker has criticized *Beowulf*, for he considers the plot to be childish.^{4a}> The idea of the hero who kills an ogre, that ogre’s mother, and then a dragon, belongs to a children’s tale. But these elements are, in fact, inevitable; they are there because they must be. Once he chose that legend, the author could not possibly omit the ogre, the witch, or the dragon. The public expected them, because it knew the legend. Moreover, these monsters were

symbols of the powers of evil; they were taken very seriously by that audience.

One of the poem's most curious aspects is that it takes place first in Denmark and then in southern Sweden. This indicates that after three hundred years of living in new lands, the Anglo-Saxons still felt homesick for their old homelands on the Baltic Sea; this further suggests that there is a strong affinity between the Norsemen and Anglo-Saxons. The characters in the poem are Scandinavian. The hero himself is a Swedish prince. This might tempt some scholars to claim that the lore of the Goths contains the legend of their origins, which says they come from Northern Europe. But there is no proof of this. (We actually know that the first news of these people has them hailing from south of the Danube.) However, Charles XII of Sweden believed this. So much so that during a conflict with the pope, he wrote to him [the pope], warning him not to feel too secure; he said his ancestors had already entered Rome once, and their descendants were no less brave. He was hinting at a possible invasion that would repeat the Gothic invasions of Italy. (Now, if we look closely at the word "Geats," we see that it can easily be associated with "Goths."^{5a} Hence, if we identify the Geats with the Goths, the Spaniards would be relatives of the Norsemen. Hence, all descendants of the Spaniards would be relatives of Beowulf!)

In the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*, we see that the bloody and bellicose events are the most paramount. The poet of *Beowulf* was interested in hospitality, manners, gift-giving, and minstrels more than in military feats; in other words, he was interested in what we would now call "social life." All of these things were valued at that time and must have been quite appealing to the Saxons, who lived in a violent era and in inhospitable lands. Europe was colder then. We know this because research has shown that the animals who lived at that time in the south of Europe now live in the north. For example, reindeer used to live in Germany and are now found only in Scandinavia. England was a marshy land. The

Germans considered it to be a terrible, noxious place. They populated all those swamps with evil beings, devils. Moreover, the psychology of these people is revealed by the fact that they counted the years by the winters, and the days by the nights. The cold that prevailed in that land is what constantly shows up in these texts; always mentioned are the terrors of the snow, the hardships of winter. The arrival of spring was welcomed as a great event.

Returning to the poem, the first episode deals extensively with the mythic king of Denmark, Scyld Scefing, which means "shield with the sheaf." This name is derived from the legend of his origins. One day, a baby arrives on the coast of Denmark in a mysterious ship. There was nobody manning the ship, and the child is lying on the bottom, on a bed of weapons, sheaves of wheat, and jewels. This prodigious child becomes king and was so strong that he made his people great. This is, in the concept of the era, a "good king": one who terrifies his neighbors, is strong, and is a warrior, and whose men fear and respect him. Time passes and the king grows old; he feels that the hour of his death is upon him. So he plans his funeral and gives orders for it to be carried out according to his instructions. These include building a ship exactly like the one he came in and placing him next to the mast surrounded by weapons and jewels, then pushing him out to sea.

All peoples have believed that the territory of death lies beyond the sea. Life was associated with the course of the sun; since the sun is born in the east and dies in the west, a parallel was drawn to human life. It was believed that when it was over, one went to the land where the sun dies, to the west, beyond the sea. Hence, in the Celtic legends, paradise was thought to be in the west. In Greek mythology, the kingdom of death was beyond the water, and one had to cross the water to reach it. So, this ship they push out to sea has that meaning. Next comes a description of the ship and the king lying next to the mast, and then of the subjects crying, pushing the ship out to sea. This is one

of the most powerful scenes in the poem.⁶ We cannot know if in the mind of the poet—who genuinely felt this scene—if this king being pushed out to sea (in the ship he arrived in) is a symbol of man mysteriously returning to the place from which he mysteriously came. In any case, this ritual of launching the ship is not an invention of this poet but rather a Germanic custom. Ships containing the skeletons of men and animals have been found at the bottom of the sea. We can deduce from this that they not only pushed the dead out to sea, but on their last trip, they were accompanied by their servants and their favorite animals. It was a Germanic custom to bury the dead with their dogs at their feet. In the book *Beau Geste*, the hero says that he “had his Viking’s funeral with a dog at his feet.”⁷ He was talking about a sergeant who had been buried. There is an ancient text that also says that after the ship was launched, it would be set on fire.

The author [of *Beowulf*] intentionally described different burial rites of the Germanic people. This can be seen at the end of the poem, with Beowulf’s funeral next to the sea, on a pyre so high it can be seen by sailors out at sea, and that is heaped with weapons, shields, and helmets. This detail also appears in the *Odyssey*, where there is also a funeral rite.

In the next class we will continue our study of *Beowulf* and probably examine the Finnsburh Fragment.

CLASS 3

BEOWULF. BRAVERY AND BOASTFULNESS: *BEOWULF* AS COMPARED TO THE *COMPADRITOS*.

MONDAY, OCTOBER 17, 1966

In the previous class, we discussed the epic poem *Beowulf*. Today, we will pick up where we left off. I recounted one of the most poetic episodes of the poem: the one about the child who arrives mysteriously on the coast of Denmark, who becomes king and instills fear in his enemies. The poet notes that he is a good king because what is expected of a king is that he be strong and warlike and that his neighbors fear his people. Then the years pass and when death approaches, he gives instructions for his funeral. So they prepare the funeral ship.

The poet says that this ship was "*isig ond utfus*." The first word means "frozen," and is related to the English word "iced" and the German word *eisig*. But we don't know if the ship is covered with ice (it is strange that the poet hadn't spoken of ice earlier), or if he meant "resplendent," "shimmering," "as clear as ice." The third word is difficult to translate because *fus* means "eager" and *ut* means "out."¹ In other words, the ship was eager to leave, as if it were a living being. Then the ship is described; the poet says that it flew a flag made of gold fabric, and that the king was placed in a seated position, leaning against the mast: "The powerful one against the mast." Then his vassals, crying, push the ship out to sea, and then we have these lines that I know by heart: "Nobody, neither the counselors in their assemblies

nor the heroes under the heavens, knows who received that cargo." And it is said that the ship was pushed far away by the power of the sea: "Under the power of the sea, it traveled far." Now, an ancestor is also mentioned, who is also called Beowulf, like the eponymous hero of the poem, but he is a different Beowulf. And this lets us imagine that there is a connection between the royal house of Denmark and the royal house of the Geats—that tribe that is a bit mysterious—which some have identified with the Jutes who invaded England, and others, with the Goths, in other words, the ancestors of the Spaniards, who were the Visigoths. But there is a lot of disagreement about this.

One peculiar feature of *Beowulf* is that the story we are looking at is a primitive one—even puerile, according to some. Yet the atmosphere in which this barbarous and primitive fable takes place is not the fantastical atmosphere of a fairy tale even if the events that take place are. The story abounds in realistic details, especially regarding the genealogy of the characters. It has, as the English Germanist Ker has said, the solid atmosphere of a realist novel.² The events are fantastical, but we feel the characters as real, as garrulous as if they were right there, and given to oratory; they are characters who like good manners, conviviality, ceremony. It is true that all of this was highly valued during that dangerous era, a violent era when people perhaps did not much like violence; it was a barbarous era that nonetheless was drawn to culture, that enjoyed culture.

The poet lists the names of the kings of the royal house of Denmark, until he gets to a king named Hrothgar. These consonant clusters are common in Anglo-Saxon, but have since been lost: *hr*, and the runic letter following it, can be transcribed as *th*.³ We have another example in the Anglo-Saxon word for "ring." In German and, I think, in Scandinavian languages, it is *ring*, whereas the Anglo-Saxons said *hring*, and there are other analogous sounds. For example, "neigh" in English is the verb *hnægan* in Anglo-

Saxon.⁴ There are other consonant clusters we cannot pronounce, because we don't know how they were pronounced. For example, for "haughty" they said *wlanc*. I don't know how the *wl* should be pronounced. It's possible the *W* was pronounced as a *U*. But let's return to the poem.

The poet names several kings until he finally gets to Hrothgar, the king of Denmark, who builds a palace called Heorot. And this palace, the poet tells us, is the most splendid of palaces, though we should imagine it built of wood. I have seen beautiful houses in the United States, luxurious houses—the house of Longfellow, the house of Emerson—houses that are three hundred years old, and these houses are built of wood. Currently, in Buenos Aires, to say "a wood house" is to mean a shack. This is not the case in New England: a wood house can be very beautiful, with many floors, a salon, a library, and they are well built so there are no drafts.

The king builds the palace, and the poet tells us that this is the palace that shines over all the neighboring kingdoms; in other words, it is famous. We can imagine a large central hall where the king meets with his vassals and where he dines. I assume they ate pork and deer and drank beer from drinking horns; wine was quite rare, as it had to be brought from the south. In the poem, there is a minstrel who livens up the banquets singing and accompanying himself on the harp. The harp was the national instrument of all the Germanic peoples. The music would be, undoubtedly, very simple.

The king has his court. And there he hands out gold rings and bracelets to his vassals. This is why one of the king's titles is "ring-giver" or *beahgifa*. We find this word, *beag*, in French as *bague*, meaning "ring." The king is very powerful, but the din of the court, or the music, frightens or disturbs a monster who lives nearby in an area full of swamps, marshes, and moors. Some believe that certain regions of England are recognizable in the description of where the monster, named Grendel, lived. Lincolnshire, for

example. But this is pure conjecture. The monster is described as looking like a human being, but gigantic. He is an ogre and apparently belongs to ancient German mythology, but as the poet is Christian, he wanted to tie him to the Christian tradition, rather than the pagan tradition, so he tells us that he is a descendent of Cain. And this monster wanders around the moors and lives with his mother under a lake, so deep down that the hero swims for an entire day to reach the underground cavern where he lives with his mother, who is a witch. The poet calls her “the she-wolf of the sea,” “the sorceress of the sea.” There are also storms, which make this lake seem like the sea, and there is a description of the forests surrounding the lake. It says that crows are afraid to fly near the lake, for it is a zone of tempests, fog, solitude, and because of what could be called sacred horror. The description of the lake and its surroundings lasts about twenty lines. Now, this does not surprise us, but remember that the poem was written at the end of the seventh century or, according to the scholars, the beginning of the eighth, and it is full of sentiment for the natural world. This sentiment does not appear in other literatures until much later. One often says, too hastily—because in addition to *Beowulf*, there is also Shakespeare—that this sentiment for nature is the same as the romantic sentiment. In other words, the same as in the eighteenth century, about ten centuries after *Beowulf*. The truth is that there are books, notable books, in which the natural world as we feel it now makes no appearance. And to turn to the most famous example, I believe—I don’t know if I am certain—I suspect that in *Don Quixote*, it does not rain a single time. The landscapes described in *Quixote* have nothing in common with the landscapes of Castile: they are conventional landscapes, full of meadows, streams, and copses that belong in an Italian novel. On the other hand, in *Beowulf*, we sense nature as something fearsome, something that is hostile to man; the sense of night and darkness as fearsome, as it surely was for the Saxons, who had settled in

an unknown country whose geography they discovered only as they were conquering it. Undoubtedly, the first Germanic invaders had no precise idea of England's geography. It is absurd to imagine Horsa or Hengest arriving with a map. Completely unbelievable. We don't even know if they would have understood *Beowulf*, which is written in a very contorted language and is full of metaphors that, undoubtedly, were not used by the Anglo-Saxons in their spoken language. In any case, these metaphors never appear in their prose. And in the Scandinavian Norse regions, those most closely connected to the Saxons, we find a very marked and deliberate division between prose, which can be very eloquent and full of pathos, but is very simple, and the language of poetry, which is filled with kennings, the name for those metaphors that, as we have seen, reached an extraordinary level of complexity.

So, King Hrothgar rules over Denmark. Naturally, nobody thought of empires at that time; the idea of empire is totally foreign to the Germanic mind. But he was a prosperous king, a victorious, opulent king, and his court's jubilant celebrations—one of the metaphors for the harp is "wood of joy" or "party-wood"—upsets Grendel, who attacks the castle. The fable is poorly wrought, for at the beginning we have a very powerful king, and then this same king and his vassals and his troops, the only measure they take is to pray to the gods, to ask for help from their ancient gods, Odin, Thor, and the others. The poet tells us that all their prayers were in vain. The gods have no power at all against the monster. And thus, improbably, twelve years pass, and every few nights the ogre breaks down the castle's double doors—there were no other doors—enters, and devours one of the men. And the king does nothing. Then news of the ogre's attacks spreads. The ogre is gigantic and invulnerable to all weapons. The news reaches the neighboring country of Sweden. And in Sweden there is a youth, a prince, Beowulf, and throughout his childhood this prince has shown himself to be clumsy, slow, but he wants to gain fame with a great

feat. He has already fought in a war against the Franks, but this isn't enough for him, so he departs in a boat with fourteen companions.

Naturally, the poet makes the sea stormy, so that the trip won't be easy, so it will be difficult, and Beowulf lands in Denmark. The king's sentinel comes out to greet him, an aristocrat like Beowulf, a prince. Beowulf says that he has come to save the country and is received courteously by the court. There is one character, however, who questions Beowulf's personal courage, so Beowulf proposes a kind of contest, a swimming race, which improbably lasts ten days, a competition against another famous swimmer named Breca. The two swim for ten days and ten nights. They fight against sea monsters, who drag Beowulf to the bottom of the sea, where he kills them with his sword or chases them away. Then he surfaces, keeps swimming, and wins the race.

Now, we find ourselves up against a modern custom, a modern prejudice that distances us from the poem. Today we say, or better, we have the idea, that a brave man should not be a braggart. We think that all bragging is like that of the *Miles Gloriosus*, of the Latin comedy, who is a coward.⁵ But, generally speaking, this idea did not exist in antiquity. Heroes boasted of their deeds, and were permitted to do so. In fact, doing this gave them courage. I'd like to recite here some couplets of the *compadritos*[toughs, braggarts] from the beginning of the century in Buenos Aires. I don't think anybody would think a man was a coward because he said:

*Soy del barrio 'e Monserrá
donde relumbra el acero,
lo que digo con el pico,
lo sostengo con el cuero.*

[I am from the Monserrat neighborhood, / where blades abound, / what I say with my lips, / I back up with my hide.]

or:

*Yo soy del barrio del norte,
soy del barrio del Retiro,
yo soy aquel que no miro
con quién tengo que pelear,
y aquí en el milonguear
ninguno se puso a tiro.*

[I'm from the northern neighborhood, / I'm from Retiro, /
I never stop to look / at who I have to fight, / and here in the
fray / nobody was up to the dare.]

or:

*Hágase a un lao, se lo ruego,
que soy de la Tierra 'el Fuego.*

[Step aside, if you please, / for I am from Tierra del
Fuego.]

That is, from the neighborhood around the
penitentiary.

In any case, Beowulf had a lot in common with our
compadritos from Monserrat or Retiro. Beowulf wanted to
boast about how brave he was. And no one thought he was a
coward. To find a more famous example, we can turn to the
Iliad, in which the warriors state who they are, and their
reputations do not suffer. On the contrary, they are
enhanced. It is a necessary prelude to combat, their way to
warm up. They could even insult each other, too, and could
accuse each other of cowardice.

In *Beowulf*, after the swimming race and the battle
against the sea monsters, everyone goes to bed and falls
asleep. This is another poorly wrought episode: they are
expecting the ogre's attack, yet they sleep peacefully. The

only one who stays awake is Beowulf, and Beowulf is unarmed, because he knows that no weapon can harm the monster. Moreover, he has confidence in his physical strength, which is extraordinary. The poet tells us that he has in his fist the strength of thirty men.

Then the monster arrives, circles the castle, and although the door is locked with strong iron bars, he breaks it down, surprises the first sleeping warrior he comes upon, and devours him whole, raw. Also, he devours the warrior's hands and feet, then rashly approaches Beowulf. And then Beowulf, who has not yet risen, grabs the ogre's hand and breaks it. And the two begin to fight—a fight others do not participate in—which allows the hero to show off even more. And Beowulf, with only the strength of his hands—imagine we have before us a northern Hercules—pulls off the ogre's arm and shoulder. As they fight, they shout. This is realistic. For example, when infantrymen charge, they shout. There is a poem by Kipling that describes this. So, they are both shouting. The entire palace of Heorot trembles, it is about to collapse, but finally the ogre receives a mortal wound and runs off to die in his swamp. The next day, they celebrate the death of the ogre and hang his arm in the hall as a trophy. There is another banquet, but that night the ogre's mother, who is a witch and also very strong, comes to recover her dead son's arm, and she takes it and kills a warrior. Then Beowulf decides to look for the swamp where the ogre lives, and that's where we get the description of the swamp, one of the classic passages in the poem. Some men want to accompany Beowulf, but he is the hero: it is better for him to perform his feats alone, as Hercules did centuries before. And he sees pieces of flesh, human flesh, possibly the ogre's, in the swamp. And there is also foam, which seems to be bloody. The hero dives in and swims for a whole day before he reaches the cavern. The cavern is dry; it is illuminated by a supernatural, magical light. And there is the ogre's mother, horrible, as strong as the ogre himself. Beowulf fights her and is on the verge of being defeated:

she is actually stronger than her son. But [Beowulf] manages to grab a sword hanging on the wall. The ogre's mother is not invulnerable to iron; he kills her with the sword, but the sword melts because the witch's blood contains some kind of poison. Then, Beowulf takes the ogre's head and also the hilt of the sword, though not the blade, which has melted. On shore, they are waiting for him anxiously. He rises to the surface with this trophy, and here the poet invents an incidental detail: the giant's head is so heavy that two men are needed to carry it. Then Beowulf, covered in blood, wounded and triumphant, returns to Hrothgar's palace, where Hrothgar thanks him for what he has done and showers him with gifts—accepting these gifts is not dishonorable—and Beowulf returns to his own kingdom, in the south of Sweden.

Now, Beowulf was not actually Swedish. The Swedes belonged to a different tribe. The Geats were enemies of the Swedes. . . . Well, in this way, five years passed . . . excuse me, fifty years, “fifty winters,” the poet says. The Saxons counted time by winters because of the harshness of the climate. In the meantime, Beowulf performs many military feats, but the poet mentions them only in passing because he is interested only in Beowulf's first and last feat. It has been said that one of the aims of the poem was to portray an exemplary prince, according to the concept of the time. That is, one who is strong—supernaturally strong, for he has the strength of thirty men—as well as a slayer of monsters who are a danger to everyone—again this coincides with Hercules—and also just. Because when he dies at the end of the poem, he invokes God and says that he never dealt out death to a single relative in the great banquet hall. And this is considered to be a rather extraordinary fact, and it probably was at the time.

Fifty years pass, fifty years of victories, and, finally, a triumphant peace, and then another character appears, a dragon who has lived for time immemorial in a cave guarding treasures. The idea of the dragon as a guardian of

treasures is common in ancient Germanic myth. We remember the case of Sigurd, or Siegfried, and the dragon; and there was also the griffin in Pliny's *Natural History*, who guards mountains of gold and fights against the one-eyed Arimaspians.⁶ The idea of the dragon as the guardian of treasures is so common that in Norse poetry one of the most common metaphors for gold—immediately understood by everybody—was “the dragon's bed.” That is, people imagined the gold, and the dragon lying on top of it, sleeping on it in order to guard it better. The poet tells us about an escaped slave who enters the cave when the dragon is asleep and steals a golden pitcher. Then the slave disappears from the fable. The following day, the dragon awakes, notices that the golden pitcher is gone, and leaves his cave, thinking he must take revenge for the theft. Then we see a human trait: before destroying the Geats' land, he goes back into the cave and carefully looks through everything, just to make sure the pitcher isn't there somewhere. But he doesn't find it, so he terrorizes the kingdom of the Geats, just as the ogre, half a century before, had done in Denmark. Then the news of what is happening reaches old Beowulf, and again he decides to fight a monster. And if we want to use our imaginations a little, we can see this as a story about a man pursued by a fate: to fight a monster and die. The dragon is, in some way—and whether or not it is understood this way by the poet, it really shouldn't matter to us because an author's intentions are less important than the success of his execution—the dragon is yet another encounter with his fate. That is, the dragon is again the ogre of Denmark. And the king goes there with his men, who want to help him, but he says no, he'll manage on his own as he did fifty years before with the ogre and the ogre's mother. He reaches the mouth of the cave of the dragon, who has been described with many metaphors—he has been called “spotted horror of dusk” and “guardian of gold”—and Beowulf challenges him. The dragon emerges, and they engage in battle. There is a rather

bloody description of the battle; Beowulf slays the dragon, but the dragon breathes fire, and Beowulf knows that this fire will poison him. And there is a servant named Wiglaf, the only one who has accompanied him there; and the king says that he is going to offer his soul to the Lord—this paragraph is Christian—and he knows he will be going to heaven because his life has been righteous, and he gives instructions for his funeral. The funeral is not like the one we saw earlier: there will be no funeral ship. He tells them to erect a pyre and pile it high with helmets, shields, and shining armor—“*Helmum behongen, hildebordum, beorhtum byrnum, swa he bena wæs.*” *Helmum behongen* means “adorned with helmets”—the Germanic word *helm* is the same. And *hildebordum* is “battle board”: that’s what the shield was called, which was round, made of wood, and wrapped in leather. And then *beorhtum byrnum* means “bright armor,” and *swa he bena wæs* means “just as he ordered.” Then they lie him out on top of the pyre and set it on fire, and he has instructed them to build a burial mound that can be seen from the sea, so that people will remember it. He is then buried in the burial mound, and twelve warriors on horseback ride circles around the king’s tomb and sing his praises and celebrate his brave deeds.

Now, in a medieval text about the history of the Goths, by Jordanes, Attila’s burial and the same ritual is described: the pyre, the burial mound, and the warriors who ride circles around it singing praises of the king.⁷ It is clear that the poet was an erudite poet: in his poem he wanted to describe the various funeral rites of the Germanic peoples. (They considered Attila to be one of their own, even though he was a Hun, because many Germanic kings were his vassals.) The poem ends with praise of Beowulf, and this praise is quite odd. Though I don’t agree, some have believed it to be an interpolation, for one might expect there to be mention of the ogre, as well as of the dragon, and of the other Swedes against whom he fought, and his victories, but none of this is mentioned. The penultimate line says that he was *manna*

mildust, the mildest of men, the kindest of men, and one *most eager for praise*. This also contradicts our current sensibility, because we live in an era of propaganda: a man's desire to be famous is not seen as an admirable characteristic. But we have to remember that this poem was written in the Middle Ages. In the Middle Ages, it was believed that all praise was just: that men wished to be praised, deserved to be praised. The poem ends with these words: "the mildest of men and the most eager for praise." Nothing is said about his courage. However, we have seen that courage exemplified throughout the entire poem.

There's another curious aspect of this poem, and this is the appearance of a minstrel, and this minstrel sings—but doesn't finish—a Germanic legend predating *Beowulf*: the story of a princess from Denmark named Hildeburh. Her name means "castle of war" or "castle of the battle." Now, this fragment as sung by the minstrel might not be the same as the song—the old ballad—because the language is like the rest of *Beowulf*. That is, it is in rhetorical language with an abundance of metaphors, and undoubtedly Germanic primitive poetry was much simpler. We can see this, for example, in *The Lay of Hildebrand*; although composed more or less at the same time as *Beowulf*, it corresponds to a much more primitive era, for there are few alliterations, and I believe there is only one metaphor, and even that is a dubious one: armor is called "battle vestments," or "war vestments," which may or may not be a metaphor. It is far from the complexity of "weave of men" for "battle," as we find among the Norsemen, or "swan-road" for "sea."

Now, this story is told only in part, and it is the subject of the other ancient Anglo-Saxon epic fragment, Finnsburh Fragment, which contains about sixty lines and must be, I suspect, prior to *Beowulf* because of the directness of the language.⁸

The fable chosen by the author of *Beowulf* does not lend itself to pathos. In it we have two feats performed by the same hero. The two are separated by an interval of fifty

years, and there is no conflict in the poem. In other words, Beowulf always fulfills his duty as a brave man, and that's all. He dies bravely. The poem is full of pious pronouncements. Some are obviously pagan, for example, when it says that it is "better to avenge than mourn a dead friend." This is clearly pagan. It belongs to an era when revenge was not only a right but a duty—a man was obliged to avenge the death of his friend. So there is no conflict. The story of Hildeburh, on the other hand, which is interpolated into *Beowulf*, contains conflict. This is the story. There is a princess in Denmark named Hildeburh, and there is discord between the Danes and the Frisians, the people from the Low Countries. And so it is decided that a princess, the princess of Denmark, will marry the king of the Frisians, so that through this alliance between the two royal houses, the conflict will be resolved. This practice was so common that one of the metaphors for the princess used in the Saxon poem is "peace-weaver," not because she was particularly peaceful but because she served to weave peace between neighboring, rival nations. Hildeburh marries the king of the Frisians and then her brother comes to visit her, arriving at court with sixty warriors. They are received hospitably and given lodgings in rooms that surround a central hall with two doors. Identical, let's say, to Hrothgar's palace. But at night, the Frisians attack. The Danes defend themselves and fight for several days, during which the princess of Denmark's brother kills his nephew. Finally, the Frisians realize that they are no match for the Danes. Both Anglo-Saxon poems express true sympathy for the Danes and for the Geats, that is, for the Norsemen. After a few days, when [the Frisians] realize that they can no longer fight, that they are unable to defeat them [the Danes], they propose a truce, which the princess's brother accepts. He waits for the winter to be over to set sail—because during the winter, the sea was obstructed by ice—then he returns to his country. There he assembles a force larger than the one with sixty warriors that previously accompanied him. He returns, attacks the

Frisians, kills the king, and carries his sister, the princess, back with him to his country.

Now, if this poem existed in its entirety—and we have to assume that it once did—we would have the possibility of a tragic conflict, because we would have the story of the princess whose son dies by the hand of his uncle. In other words, the poet would have more opportunity for pathos than in *Beowulf*, which simply recounts two brave feats, neither credible to us, against an ogre and a dragon. In the next class we are going to examine—and we can examine it in great detail—the Finnsburh Fragment. We'll leave out the beginning of the fragment, because I've already told it. We will start from the moment the Danes realize that the Frisians have forcibly entered their rooms and are going to attack them, and we will continue until the Frisians realize they are no match for the Danes and that they have been defeated by them. We are going to analyze it almost line by line. There are about sixty lines. You will see how direct the language is, so different from the pompous language of *Beowulf*. Maybe its author was a man of action. In the case of *Beowulf*, on the other hand, we can imagine the author as a monk, from Northumbria, in the north of England, a reader of Virgil, who set himself the task, quite audacious at that time, to write a Germanic epic poem. And this brings us to a small problem, which is this: why is it that in the Germanic nations—and here I am thinking of Ulfilas, I am thinking of the Saxons, I am thinking later of Wycliff, and of England in the sixteenth century, of Luther—why were there translations of the Bible in the Germanic nations before the Latin nations?⁹

There is a Germanist of Jewish origin, Palgrave, who had an answer, and the answer is this: the Bible that was read in the Middle Ages was the *Latin Vulgate Bible*, that is, it was a Latin text.¹⁰ Now, if anyone would have thought of translating the Bible into Provençal or Italian or Spanish—these languages are too similar to Latin for the translation

not to run the risk of seeming like a parody of the original. On the other hand, the Germanic languages are so totally different from Latin that the translation could be undertaken without running that risk. What I mean is, in the Middle Ages, those who spoke Provençal or Spanish or Italian knew that they were speaking a language that was a variant or a corruption of Latin. So it would have seemed irreverent to go from Latin to Provençal. On the other hand, the Germanic languages were totally different. [Translations of the Bible] that were undertaken for people who knew no Latin did not run any risks. Now, maybe we can apply this to *Beowulf*. Why was *Beowulf* the first epic poem written in a vernacular language? Because that vernacular language was profoundly different from Latin, so that nobody reading *Beowulf* could think that they were reading a parody of the *Aeneid*. On the other hand, quite a lot of time had to pass for the Romance-language minstrels to have the courage to try epic poetry in their own language.

In the next class, then, we will look at the Finnsburh Fragment, and at a much later Anglo-Saxon epic poem, and with that we'll bring the first unit to an end.

CLASS 4

THE FINNSBURH FRAGMENT. "THE BATTLE OF BRUNANBURH." THE VIKINGS. ANECDOTES FROM BORGES'S TRIP TO YORK. TENNYSON'S TRANSLATION.

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 21, 1966

In the previous class, we talked about the heroic Finnsburh Fragment. This fragment was discovered at the beginning of the eighteenth century and was published by an antiquarian, who would now be called a scholar. Then the manuscript was lost. This fragment corresponds to part of a ballad sung by a minstrel in Hrothgar's court, in the epic poem *Beowulf*.¹ I think in the previous class I gave you a summary of the story of Princess Hildeburh of Denmark, whose brother [Hrothgar] marries her to the king of Frisia, a kingdom in the Low Countries, to prevent a war between the Danes and the Frisians. After a while—which must have been considerable, because later, she already has a grown son—her brother goes to visit her, accompanied by sixty warriors. They are given lodgings in a chamber off the central hall, which has doors on both sides. Then the poem begins with the guards seeing something shining, a glow in the night's darkness. And then we assume, based on what follows, that there are several speculations about the reason for the glow. "The eaves are not burning," said the king [Hrothgar], a novice in battle, 'nor is day dawning, nor is a dragon flying toward us,'"—such an explanation was possible at that time—"nor are the eaves of this hall burning: an attack is underway." And we can see from the previous lines that the

glow they have seen is the glow of the moon “shining through the clouds” and onto the shields and spears of the Frisians who have come to attack them, treacherously.

The language is extremely direct, and I’d like you to hear the first [lines], so you can hear again the hard sounds of Old English, which is so much better suited to epic poetry than modern English; modern English no longer has open vowels, and the consonant sounds aren’t as hard.

“*Hornas byrnað naefre?*” *Hornas* here means “eaves”; “*byrnað naefre*” is “never burn” or “are not burning.” “*Hleorode ða, heaðogeong cyning*” is: “the king, a novice in battle.” “*Ne ðis ne dagað eastan, ne her draca . . .*”--*draca* is “dragon”—“. . . *ne fleogeð, ne her ðisse healle hornas ne byrnað, ac her forð berað,*” and then the king has some kind of vision of what is going to happen next. He is not talking about the present. He says: “The birds are singing.” These are the birds of prey that will swoop down to the battlefield. Then he says, “the wood of battle resounds”—“*guðwudu,*” in other words, “the spear.” “Shield will answer sword,” and then he speaks of the moon that reflects off the armor of the attackers. Then he tells his warriors to awaken, to rise, to think about courage. Many knights adorned with gold—with gold embroidery on their cloaks—rise, strap on their swords, draw them, and advance upon the two doors to defend the hall of Finn.

The poem is titled Finnsburh, “the castle of Finn.” The word *burh* or *burg* is a word you know, and it means “castle” and has remained in the names of many cities: Edinburgh, “castle of Edin”; Strasbourg, Gothenburg—in the south of Sweden—and the Castilian city of Burgos, which is a Visigoth name. Then we have words like “bourgeois,” someone who lives in a city, and “bourgeoisie.” In French, it gave rise to the word *burgraves*, the counts of the city (the name of a play by Hugo), as well as other words.²

The poem, then, names the warriors who come to the defense of the stronghold. And one name in particular stands out: this is Hengest, and the poem says “Hengest

himself.” It has been suggested that this Hengest is the same who will later establish the first Germanic kingdom in England. This is plausible because Hengest was a Jute. We surely remember that Jutland is the name for the northern part of Denmark. Before becoming the captain who establishes the first Germanic kingdom in England, Hengest could have fought among fellow Danes. Moreover, if this Hengest were not the same Hengest who began the conquest of England, I don’t see why the author would have mentioned him with such emphasis in these verses. The poet was Anglo-Saxon, and the conquest of England took place in the middle of the fifth century. The poem is, supposedly, from the end of the seventh century. (It could be earlier, for the style is much more direct and has none of those Latinate inversions and complicated kennings—the kinds of metaphors in *Beowulf*.) So, an English audience would be interested in knowing that this protagonist was one of the founders of the Saxon kingdoms of England.

Then the poet turns his attention to those who are treacherously attacking the Danes. And among them is Garulf, son of Queen Hildeburh and the nephew of one of the defenders, at whose hands he possibly dies. Someone tells him that he is too young, that he should not risk his life in the attack, that there will be many who wish to take his life because he is the prince, the son of the queen. But he is a brave young man, undaunted by this advice, and he asks for the name of one of the defenders. (Now, this belongs to an aristocratic era. He, as a prince, would not fight just anybody: he could only fight someone of his same rank.) Then the defender answers: “Siegfried is my name, I am prince of the Secgen”—all traces of this tribe have been lost —“I am a famous adventurer, I have fought many a battle, and now fate will decide what you shall get from me, or what I must await from you,” in other words, fate will decide who will win glory and who, death.

The name “Sigeferð” means “victorious spirit” and it is clearly the Saxon form of the name “Siegfried,” made

famous by Wagner's operas, the one who kills the dragon (its Norse equivalent would be "Sigurd" in the *Völsungasaga*).³ Then the battle is fought and the poet tells us that the shields, as Garulf, the son, foresaw, fall under the blows of the spears. And many of the attacking warriors fall, and the first to fall is Garulf, the young Frisian, who was told not to risk fighting in the front lines. The battle continues, somewhat implausibly, for five days, and many Frisians fall, but none of the defenders do. The poet gets very excited here and says, "I have never heard it said that sixty victorious fighters bore themselves better in a battle of men." Here the phrase "battle of men" seems redundant: all battles are battles of men. But it really gives the sentence more power. And then we have this curious word, *sigebeorna*, "warriors of victory," "men of victory," or "victorious warriors." The poet also says that the hall of Finnsburh glowed with the shimmering of the swords, "as if Finnsburh were in flames." I think there is an analogous metaphor in the *Iliad*, comparing a battle to a fire. The comparison refers to the glow of the arms as well as its moral stature.

Perhaps I do not need to remind you that in Norse mythology, Valhalla, Odin's paradise, is illuminated, not with candles but with swords that shine with their own supernatural glow. Then the "protector of the people"—as the king of the Frisians is called—asks how the battle is going. They tell him they have lost many men and that one of the Frisians has withdrawn, that his shield and his helmet have been destroyed, and then one of the youths. . . . And here ends the fragment, one of the oldest of all Germanic literature, definitely older than *Beowulf*. We know the rest of the story from other sources. We know that a truce is declared, and a year later, the king of the Danes, the brother of the queen, is given permission to return to Denmark. He leaves after that year, then returns with an expedition, defeats the Frisians, destroys the castle of Finn, and finally goes home with his sister. So here we have a tragic conflict:

a princess has lost her son, possibly by the hand of his uncle, her brother. It is a pity that more of this poem has not been preserved, for it is so rich in pathetic possibility; but we should be grateful for the sixty-odd lines that *have* been preserved.

The two Anglo-Saxon epic poems we have looked at so far have Norse subject matter. But then there is another, much later, that takes place in England. And it narrates feats of arms between the Saxons and the Norsemen. Because around the eighth century, England—already a Christian country—began to suffer from the depredations of the Vikings. They came primarily from Denmark. Some were also Norwegians, but they were all considered Danish. And it is not impossible, actually it's quite probable, that some were Swedes. I would like to pause here to talk about the Vikings.

The Vikings were perhaps the most extraordinary of all the Germanic peoples of the Middle Ages. They were the best sailors of their time. They had ships, which they called “longships,” that had a dragon, the head of a dragon, on the prow. They had masts, sails; and they were fitted with rows of oars. It was said of one of the Norwegian kings, Olaf, that he was so agile he could jump from oar to oar as he sailed the ship.⁴ The maritime and bellicose adventures of the Vikings were extraordinary. To begin with, we have the conquest of northern and central England, where they founded a region called Danelaw, “the law of the Danes,” because that is where Danish law ruled. That's where the people settled. They were farmers, and they were also warriors, and they ended up mingling with the Saxons and disappearing among them. But they left many words in the English language. Generally speaking, languages take nouns and adjectives from other languages. But English still has Norse pronouns. For example, the word “they” is a Danish word. The Saxons said *hi*, but as English had “he,” the words were confused, and they ended up adopting the Danish “they.”⁵ The word “dream” is also Danish. In the

dialect of the farmers of Yorkshire, the site of one of the principal Danish settlements, many Norse words persist. When I was in York, I had the opportunity to speak with the art critic, Sir Herbert Read, and he told me that years before, a Danish or Norwegian ship—I cannot remember which—was shipwrecked off the coast of Yorkshire.⁶ Naturally, the people who lived in the town went to help the shipwrecked sailors. He spoke with the captain, who spoke English, like all educated Scandinavians—in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway, English is taught in primary school—but the sailors and the less educated people did not speak English, though they managed to communicate with the fishermen and farmers who came to help. And this is remarkable, if we consider that at least ten or eleven centuries had passed. Nevertheless, there were still enough remnants of the Norse language in English for these common folks to understand each other. He said that a Yorkshire farmer would not say, “I am going to York,” but rather “I’m going *till* York,” and that “till” is Norse. We could offer multiple examples. But for the sake of brevity, here’s one: the day of the week “Thursday,” which in Saxon is *thunresdæg*, and contains the Norse name for Thor. But let’s return to the Vikings.

The Vikings were individual adventurers. This is one reason there was never a Norse empire. The Norsemen had no consciousness of race. Each person pledged loyalty to his tribe and his chief. There was a moment in English history when there could have been a Norse empire, when Cnut was king of England, Denmark, and Norway.⁷ But he had no consciousness of race. He chose Saxons and Danes, indiscriminately, as governors and ministers. The truth is, the idea of empire was a Roman idea, one totally foreign to the Germanic mind. But let’s look at what the Vikings did. They established kingdoms in England and in France, in the county of Normandy, which means “men from the north.” They sacked London and Paris. They could have remained in those cities, but they preferred to demand a tribute and

withdraw. They established a Danish kingdom in Ireland. It is believed that the city of Dublin was founded by them. They discovered America—they settled on the east coast of America—and they discovered Greenland.⁸ This idea of calling it Greenland is almost like an auctioneer's trick, because Greenland is a land of ice floes. But they named it Greenland to attract colonists. Then they abandoned America. They could have been the conquerors of America, but such a poor land, a land inhabited by Eskimos and redskins, a land without precious metals—they never reached Mexico—held no interest for them. Then, to the south, they sacked cities in France, Portugal, Spain, and Italy, and even reached Constantinople. The Byzantine emperor of Constantinople had a guard of Scandinavian warriors.⁹ They had come from Sweden, after traversing all of Russia. It has been said that the first kingdom of Russia was founded by a Norseman named Rurik, from whom the country derives its name. Viking graves have been found along the banks of the Black Sea. They also conquered those small islands to the north of the British Isles, the Shetlands, the Orkneys.¹⁰ The inhabitants now speak a dialect that contains many Norse words, and there is a certain Jarl who is spoken of, an earl of Orkney . . . “traveler to Jerusalem,” they called him.¹¹ And there were also reports about another Viking who sacked a city in Italy, erroneously thinking it was Rome, then he set it on fire to have the honor of being the first Norseman to set fire to Rome.¹² It turned out to be a tiny port town of no importance, but he had his moment of glory, his military joy. They also sacked cities in North Africa. In the Norse language, there's a word, *Serkland*, which means “land of Saracens,” and that word refers indistinctly to Portugal, Morocco, and Algeria—for the Moors lived there. All of that was the land of the Saracens. And farther south is what the Norse historians called *Blaland*, “blue land,” “land of blue men,” or rather Negroes, because they mixed the colors up a little. Besides one word, *söl/r*, which means

“yellowed” and is used to describe fallow fields and the sea, they have no colors. The snow is often spoken of, but they never say the snow is white. Blood is spoken of, but they never say it is red. They talk about the fields, but they never say they are green. We don’t know if this is the result of some kind of colorblindness or if it was simply a poetic convention. The Homeric Greeks said “the color of wine.” But we don’t know what color wine was for the Greeks; they don’t talk about colors, either. On the other hand, Celtic poetry that is contemporaneous or prior to Germanic poetry, contains an abundance of colors—it’s full of colors. There, every time a woman is mentioned, they speak about her white body, her hair the color of gold or fire, her red lips. They also talk about the green fields, and specify the colors of fruits, etcetera. In other words, the Celts lived in a visual world; the Norse did not.

And now, as we are discussing epic poetry, let’s take a look at some much later epic compositions that are still considered to be from the ninth century. First of all, we will look at the ode, the “Battle of Brunanburh,” written at the beginning of the tenth century. It appears in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.¹³ There are several versions, and those of you who know English can look at a really splendid translation of it among the works of Tennyson. That is, it is readily available. Tennyson did not know Anglo-Saxon, but one of his sons studied a primitive form of English and published a prose translation of the work in a specialized magazine. This translation interested the father, to whom the son surely explained the rules of Anglo-Saxon meter. He was told that it was based on alliteration, not rhyme, and that the number of syllables in each line was irregular, so Tennyson, a poet who was quite hooked on Virgil, tried for once in his life, and with unquestionable success, this experiment that had never been tried in any language, which was to write in modern English an almost literal translation of an Anglo-Saxon poem, and using Anglo-Saxon

meter.¹⁴ The truth is, Tennyson stretches the rules of this meter slightly. For example, there are more alliterations and one better alliteration in Tennyson's version than in the original poem. In any case, his version deserves to be read. In any edition of Tennyson's poems you will find the "Battle of Brunanburh."¹⁵ And before we talk about this ode, we should talk about the battle. According to the poem, it was one of the longest and bloodiest waged in England during the Middle Ages, for it began at dawn and lasted the entire day until dusk, which is very long for a battle in the Middle Ages.¹⁶ Think of our famous battle of Junín, which lasted three-quarters of an hour; not a single shot was fired, and the entire battle was waged with sabers and spears.¹⁷ We can see that a whole day for a battle in the Middle Ages meant it was very long, analogous to the long battles of the Civil War in the United States, the bloodiest of the nineteenth century, and the long battles of the First and Second World Wars.

The circumstances of the battle are quite curious. There is an alliance, which would at first have seemed invincible, between Constantine, the king of Scotland—Scotland was an independent kingdom at the time—and his son-in-law Olaf—in this poem he is called Anlaf—the Danish king of Dublin. They fought against the Saxons of Wessex. (Wessex means "land of the western Saxons.") Also fighting were five British—in other words, Celtic—kings. So we have this coalition of Scots, Norsemen from Ireland, and British kings against the Saxon king Athelstan, which means "noble stone," and one of his brothers. There is one detail that has never been explained. According to all the chronicles, the Danish king of Dublin leaves Dublin to invade England. What one would naturally expect is for him to cross the North Channel and land in England. For unknown reasons, though—perhaps he was hoping for a surprise attack—he took his ships—five hundred, each carrying one hundred warriors—all the way around the north of Scotland and

landed in a place, which has not been well identified, on the east coast of England, not on the west coast as we would expect. There he joined forces with the Scots of Constantine and with the last British kings, who came from Wales. And thus they made up a formidable army. Then King Athelstan and his brother Edmund advance from the south to meet them. The two armies meet, confront each other, and decide to wait till the following day to begin the battle—battles in those days were a little like tournaments. King Anlaf devised a plan to discover the location and layout of the Saxon camp. He dressed up as a minstrel, took a harp—clearly he knew how to play the harp and sing—and presented himself in the court of the Saxon king. The two languages, as I have said, were similar. Moreover, as I have also said, at that time, wars were not seen as being waged between one people and another, but rather between one king and another, hence the appearance of a Danish minstrel would not have alarmed or surprised anybody. They lead the minstrel to King Athelstan, he sings in Danish, the king enjoys listening, then he gives him, possibly tosses at him, some coins. The minstrel, who has observed the layout of the Saxon camp, leaves. And here something happens that is not mentioned in the *Chronicle*, but which is not difficult to imagine. King Anlaf has received some coins. They have been given to him by the Saxon king, whom he plans to kill, or in any case, defeat, the following day. He might be thinking several things. He might be thinking—and this is the most probable—that these coins will bring him bad luck in the battle he will wage the following day. But he is probably also thinking that it is not right to accept money from a man he means to fight. Now, if he throws the coins away, they can be found, and his trick might be discovered. So he decides to bury them. But among the Saxon king's men was one who had fought under Anlaf, and he has suspicions about the identity of the phony minstrel. He follows him, sees him burying the coins, and his suspicions are thereby confirmed. So he goes back and tells the king, the Saxon: "That minstrel who was

singing here is really Anlaf, king of Dublin.”¹⁸ And the king says, “Why didn’t you tell me before?” And the soldier, obviously a noble personage, says, “King, I have sworn loyalty to you. What would you think of my loyalty if I betrayed a man I had sworn loyalty to in the past? But my advice is that you rearrange your camp.” So the king heeds the soldier, rearranges his camp, and in the spot he occupied previously—this is somewhat perfidious on the part of the Saxon king—he leaves a bishop who has arrived with his people. Before dawn, the Scots, Danes, and Britons attempt a surprise attack, duly killing the bishop, and then the battle is waged and lasts all day and is recounted in “Battle of Brunanburh.” Now, this battle was recounted by the great Icelandic poet as well, the Viking poet Egil Skallagrímsson, who fought with the Saxons against his Norse brothers. And in that battle, one of Egil’s brothers died while fighting alongside him; Egil celebrated the Saxon victory afterward in a poem that is famous in the history of Old Norse literature.¹⁹ And that poem, that panegyric to the king, includes an elegy to his brother. It is a strange poem: a panegyric, a poem of victory, that includes a sad elegy about the death of his brother who fell next to him in battle.

But let us return to the poem. We don’t know who wrote it. Probably a monk. This man, although writing at the beginning of the tenth century, had his head full of all the previous Saxon epic poetry. We find a sentence from *Beowulf* buried in the poem. He talks, for example, of five young kings put to sleep with a sword. It is one of the few moments of tenderness in the poem, how he speaks about those young kings. . . . One would expect, in a poem composed in the Middle Ages, expressions of gratitude to God, that it would thank God for having bestowed victory on the Saxons rather than the enemy. But the poet says nothing of the sort; the poet extols the glory of the king and his brother, “the long glory,” “long Mars,” the poem says literally, “*ealdorlangne tyr*.” (The word *tyr* would be equivalent to the

classical god Mars, which also means “glory.”) “They won by the edge of their sword near Brunanburh”—“*sweorda ecgum*,” “by the edge of the sword.” Then the poem says that they fought the whole day long, “From the moment the sun”—“*mære tungol*,” “that famous star,” he calls it—“slid over the fields till the glorious creature sank into the West.” Then he describes the battle, and the poet clearly feels happy at the defeat of his enemies. He speaks about the astute Scottish traitor, Constantine, who had to return to his land in the north and had no reason to boast about the meeting of the spears, the rustling of the standards. . . . He uses a lot of metaphors to describe the battle. But first he talks about Anlaf. He says that Anlaf had to flee in his boats and seek refuge in Dublin, accompanied by a few men who had barely escaped with their lives. And he says that the Saxons spent all day chasing the enemies they hated. There is one mention of God in the poem, only one, and this is when he calls the sun the “bright candle of God,” “*godes condæl beorht*.” It is the only mention of the divinity. The poem, though clearly written by a Christian—we are at the beginning of the tenth century—is infused with the ancient Germanic heroic spirit. After describing the battle, the poet pauses with obvious delight at the crow, with his beak “as hard as a horn,” that eats, devours, the corpses of men. And he also talks about “that grey beast in the forest,” about wolves that eat the corpses. All of this with a kind of joy. And when he speaks about the Danes returning to Dublin, he says that they return in shame, because defeat was considered a disgrace, especially when accompanied by flight. Anlaf and Constantine, according to the Germanic ethic, should have made sure they died in the battle they lost. It was disgraceful that they were saved, that they came out of it alive. After that, the poet tells us about the king and the prince. He says that they returned on horseback to Wessex, “each in his glory.”²⁰ And after this verse of exaltation, something happens that is also peculiar in the Middle Ages, because we need to remember that the people

at that time, like the Indians in the Pampas here, wouldn't have had much historical consciousness. This poet, however, who was obviously an educated man—he had all the ancient metaphors at his fingertips, as well as all the rules of Germanic verse—he says that never had such a great battle been waged on this island, England, not since the Saxons and the Anglos, “proud war-smiths” (he says this as if war were a tool, an iron tool), came to these islands motivated by—and here Tennyson translated “by the hunger of glory.” And he tells us that “over the broad billow broke into Britain with haughty war-workers.”

In other words, this poet from the tenth century, from the beginning of the tenth century, is recalling the Germanic conquest of England which occurred in the fifth century; he connects his memory of this present victory, which must have been very moving for the Saxons—for it was more common for the Norse to defeat them, and rare for them to be the victors—he linked it to the often secular victories enjoyed by the first Germanic peoples who arrived in England.

In the next class we will look at another Anglo-Saxon epic poem, one that commemorates a Norwegian victory over the Anglo-Saxons, not a defeat. We will then talk about Christian poetry proper, that is, poetry based on the Bible and on Christian sentiment.

CLASS 5

"THE BATTLE OF MALDON." CHRISTIAN POETRY.
"CAEDMON'S HYMN." THE RUNIC ALPHABET.
CHARACTERISTICS OF ANGLO-SAXON ELEGIES

MONDAY, OCTOBER 24, 1966

During the last decade of the tenth century, an event took place in England that had only relative military importance, but it had great relevance for the history of English literature, for out of it came the ballad of "The Battle of Maldon," which tells of a defeat rather than a victory. One could say that defeats are better than victories for poetry. Let us consider, as one example, the famous *Chanson de Roland*, one of the great poems of French literature, whose subject, as you well know, was a defeat of the rearguard of Charlemagne's army by a group of Basque mountain dwellers, who figure as Saracens in the poem.

In *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, written by the monks of several monasteries, one can read that in the last decade of the tenth century—in approximately the year 990, I do not remember the exact date—Olaf Tryggvason landed on the east coast of England and went to find Byrhtnoth, the earl of the town.¹ The Vikings demanded that he pay them a tribute. So, what did he do? He refused to pay the tribute. This all happened along the banks of a river that is today called Blackwater. Combat ensued between the Vikings, who were the leading warriors and sailors of the era, and a small group of militiamen. The Saxon militiamen were defeated by the Vikings, and soon thereafter, the king of England, who

was named Æthelred, and later nicknamed “the Unready,” agreed to pay the Danes an annual tribute, and the government continued to collect it for a long time after the threat of Viking invasions had already passed.²

It appears that the poet witnessed the battle firsthand, probably as one of the combatants. This can be deduced by the abundance of specific details. In the Middle Ages, circumstantial details were never invented. Now, they are used by all and any novelist, and any journalist. At that time, people thought differently; they thought platonically, allegorically. The abundance of circumstantial details in “The Battle of Maldon” is proof of its authenticity—or rather, nobody would have thought to invent them. The ballad has preserved several features of ancient Saxon epic poetry. For example, the characters talk too much—they make little speeches that are somewhat implausible in the middle of a battle.

Also preserved are certain formulas from ancient epic poetry, formulas we already saw in “Finnsburh” and in *Beowulf*. In general, the language is oral and colloquial and, even more important, we feel that everything recounted in the ballad is true. Things could not have happened in any other way, unless we imagine there was at the time a brilliant and anonymous novelist. But in general it is assumed, and can be felt throughout the story of the ballad, that things had to have happened that way, or at least that is how they were recounted afterward among the people. There is a French anthology published by Aubier that contains a map of the battle. And with this map we can follow the various alternatives of the battle, or rather the combat. The word “battle” is too big for Maldon.

Unfortunately, the poem is only a fragment. We don’t know how the poet started or how he ended, but most probably he began by saying, “I will tell of what happened in Maldon” or maybe “I was there,” or something of the sort. The fragment begins with the words “*brocen wurde*,” “was broken.” And we’ll never know what was broken. We don’t

know if it refers to a siege or the men who remained there. Then the narration begins, but we don't know who the subject is. We imagine it to be the earl, because he orders his men to fall out, to spur their horses on, to whip their horses so they will advance. He is obviously speaking to a group of warriors, who were probably peasants, fishermen, woodsmen, and among them are the earl's guards. Then the earl tells them to form a line. Far off, they will see the tall boats of the Vikings, those boats with the dragon on the prow and the striped sails, and the Norwegian Vikings, who have already landed. Then there appears in the scene—because this poem is very beautiful—a young man, whom, we are told, is *offan mæg*, “of the family of Offa.” Now, as Offa was the king of one of those small English kingdoms, we suspect this might not mean Offa himself, but rather that the man was from that kingdom. The Kingdom of Mercia, I think it was. And this young man is, as we can see, a young aristocrat passing through; he is not thinking about war because he has a falcon on his fist; that is, he is doing what is called falconry. But when the earl issues these orders, the young man understands that the lord will not abide cowardice, and he joins the battle. And something happens, something that is realistic and has symbolic value, something a movie director would use now. The young man realizes that the situation is serious, so he lets his beloved falcon (the epitaph “beloved” is very rare in this iron poetry of the Saxons) fly off into the forest, and he joins the battle. The text says: “He let his beloved falcon fly from his fist to the forest, and he entered the battle”:

*he let him þa of handon leofne fleogan
hafoc wið þæs holtes and to þære hilde stop*

And the poet adds that whosoever saw him act in this way would have immediately understood that he would not hesitate at that moment to take up arms. In fact, the young man is later killed. And here we can see several symbols, but

unintentional ones, of course. We might think that the falcon is a symbol of the young man's life. And we might also think that releasing the hunting falcon and entering the battle symbolizes a transition from one form of life to another. The young man ceases to be a young courtesan and turns into a warrior who is willing to die, not for his nation—for the concept of nation would have been an anachronism at that time—but for his lord, the earl, who also fought, not for England, but for his own lord, the king.

Then there appears another warrior, a member of the earl's guard, who says that he had told his lord many times how much he liked to fight, and this was the moment he could make good on his boasting. Remember that "boasting," as I have said, was not frowned upon at that time. It was understood that a brave man could and even should boast about his bravery.

We now have the two hosts. On one riverbank are the Norwegian Vikings, and on the other, the Saxon militia. And the earl instructs the Saxons, who are obviously peasants, on how they should conduct themselves. He tells them they must think about their hands and their courage, and then he shows them how to hold their shields and spears. They have released their horses. They will fight on foot, but the lord gallops from one end of the line to the other, exhorting his men, telling them they have nothing to fear. In the meantime, they are watching the Vikings descend from their boats. We can imagine the Vikings with their helmets adorned with horns, imagine all these people arriving. And the earl is riding back and forth, exhorting the men.

Then another character appears, and this character is the *wicinga ar*, the Vikings' messenger. The messenger shouts from the other bank, because the River Blackwater, which is called *Pant* in the poem, stands between them. And the messenger says, "The bold seamen send me to you to say they are ready to make a truce with you, who seems to be the most powerful one here, if you give us as much gold rings or gold bracelets"—we should assume that money was

not used at that time—“as they want, and then disband your troops, and they will be willing to return to their boat. We offer you peace in exchange for this tribute, and it’s better for you to give us this gold and for us not to destroy each other.”³

Then the earl lifts his shield and his spear. This has been interpreted in two ways. According to some commentators, it meant that he was going to speak and everybody had to remain quiet to hear his words, but it is also possible that he wanted to show everyone that he was not afraid of the Norwegian. That’s why he lifts his shield and brandishes his spear and answers with anger, saying, “Listen, seafarer, to what these people say”—or to these troops, because the word *folc* has both meanings. The people would say: “How could we surrender just like that? Why else have they brought us here?!” Etcetera. And he adds: “We will pay you a tribute, but not with gold, rather with old spears and swords. Deliver this hateful message to your chief. Tell him that here stands a vassal of Æthelred, who is willing to defend the land of Æthelred, and he should prepare for combat.” Then, the *wicinga ar*, the Viking messenger, goes to deliver the news to the Norwegian king, and the battle commences.

But the battle begins in an unsatisfactory way, because they are separated by the river and they have to fight with arrows. And one or another Saxon falls, as does one or another Norwegian. Now, there’s a place with a bridge or a ford, the text is unclear here, and three or four Saxons are sent to defend the ford, and their names are given. One of them is called “The Long One”—he must have been very tall. And then the Norwegian, shouting from the other bank, suggests something else. He suggests that they let them cross the ford without attacking, because on the Saxon side there is a meadow, and beyond the meadow is a forest, and that meadow is a good field for combat, because combats were considered to be like tournaments.

Here the chief agrees, and the poet uses the word *ofermod*, which is related to the word *Übermut* in German, and means “temerity.” This word is used twice in the poem, and the poet makes us feel that the Saxon, by agreeing, has committed an act of temerity that will have to be punished. In *Chanson de Roland* we see the exact same thing, as I alluded to previously. Roland could have sounded his horn, his *oliphant*. (This word has the same origin as “elephant,” because the horn was made from the ivory of an elephant’s tusk.) But he fails to do so, he doesn’t want to call Charlemagne to his aid, and this is why he is defeated in the end by the Saracens.

And now the earl—we know from other texts that the earl was a tall man, an erudite man, meaning he knew Latin and was well versed in the Scriptures; there remain several letters from him to a learned man of the time—he shows weakness by allowing the Vikings to cross the river; and then comes a moment of serenity in the poem, because the poet says, “the Norwegians did not care about the water,” “*for wætere ne murnon*.” The Norwegians cross the river, their shields held high so as to keep them dry. And the poet says, “*lidmen to lande, linde bæron*,” “the seafarers to the land came, their shields held high.” And the Saxons allow them to come onto dry land and then the battle begins.

All of this starts out well for the Saxons. The poem names the combatants, and there is a detail now that settles any doubt as to whether or not the description is authentic. And this is the fact that there are cowards among the Saxons who flee. Now the Saxon chief, the earl, has dismounted from his horse to fight alongside his men. And one of those cowards—named Godric, a name we already encountered in the Finnsburh Fragment—climbs on the chief’s horse and flees.⁴ So, some of the Saxons who are farther away think the chief has fled. If the chief has fled, they have no obligation to continue fighting, because their loyalty is to their chief, not to their nation. So they also flee. And here

begins the foreseeable defeat of the Saxon militias by the Vikings.

Individual acts of bravery are described. A soldier is mentioned, who with his spear “pierced the neck of the haughty Viking.” Then come details of feats of arms by the Saxon chief. The chief is wounded, mortally wounded. They try to steal his weapons. There is also an episode like this in *Chanson de Roland*, an epic element that might even have been true. And before dying—he is a Christian fighting against pagans, he is fighting against worshippers of Odin and Thor—he gives thanks to God for all the happiness he has had on Earth, including this last happiness of fighting the pagans. Then he asks God to allow his soul to come to Him and not let devils stand in his way.

The chief dies bravely, and then there is a conversation among those who remain. And an old soldier appears, and this old soldier says words that seem to be infused with the entire Germanic attitude toward life. He says, “The weaker we are, the less our strength, the boldest we shall be. I want to stay here, by the side of my lord.” In other words, he deliberately chooses death.

There is also a hostage, from the hardy stock of the Northumbrians, because this combat is waged in the south of England. And this hostage, taken during one of the smaller civil wars, the Norwegian alongside those who were his enemies, but who are Saxons or Angles like he.

There is also a young man who says, “I will stay here to die; they no longer expect victory.” And he speaks about the earl and says, “*he wæs ægðer min mæg and min hlaforð*,” “he was my kinsman and my lord.” And others also die. Among those is the young man who voluntarily freed his falcon and joined the battle. Before that comes a description of the combat, and there is also talk about eagles, crows, wolves—animals that can never be absent from any Germanic epic work. Then there is a Godric who dies bravely and the poet is cut off after these words: “This was not the same Godric who fled . . . ”

Now, this whole poem is written in very direct English, with only one or another kenning, one or another epic formula. It is written in the spirit of the ancient epic poems, and has, I think, one inestimable advantage over *Beowulf*, and that is, when we read *Beowulf*, we feel that we have in front of us the work of a learned man who set himself the task of writing a German *Aeneid*, who is describing legendary facts that he doesn't even imagine very well. Here, however, we feel the truth.

A novel was published in Sweden not long ago, I don't remember the name of the author; it was published in English as *The Long Ships*.⁵ It is about the adventures of a Viking, and in the first chapter it describes the Battle of Maldon. Now, there are some critics who say that the poem was left unfinished because word arrived that the sacrifice of these militiamen had been in vain, that the king of England had paid in gold what the earl wanted to pay with old spears and poisoned swords. But it is more likely that the rest of the poem has been lost. This poem has been translated by [R. K.] Gordon in that book I mentioned to you from Everyman's Library, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, and it is the last Saxon epic poem.⁶ Thereafter, the poem is lost and the epic tradition is lost as well. But like the poem we looked at before, the "Battle of Brunanburh," this one no longer follows the tradition of the continent. The ancient lands of the English are no longer talked about, the Low Countries are no longer talked about, nor is the mouth of the Rhine, or Denmark—instead the characters are Saxons from England: Anglo-Saxons. Because this, it seems, is the true meaning of the word: not "Anglos and Saxons" but rather the "Saxons of England," to differentiate them from what Bede, the historian, called *antiqui saxones*, that is, the Saxons who did not participate in the conquest of the British Isles.

Until now we have been following epic poetry from the end of the seventh century to the end of the tenth century. But there are two currents that sometimes cross: epic

poetry, which belongs to the pagan tradition, and Christian poetry, which is what we will now study. In other words, we will now begin the second unit.

This Christian poetry did not start out completely Christian. At the beginning, the kings converted to the Christian faith, and they forced their vassals and subjects to do the same, but this did not mean there was a moral conversion. In other words, they remained faithful to the ancient Germanic ideals, such as courage and loyalty—definitely not humility and love of one's enemy. That was inconceivable in that era. And it probably continued to be so for a long time.

In *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, [*Church History*] of *English People*, Bede talks about the first Christian poet of England, of whom only a few lines have been preserved.⁷ His name was Caedmon and his story is quite strange; we will return to it later when we talk about Coleridge and Stevenson. Here's the story: Caedmon was well along in years, a shepherd in a monastery, and a shy old man. The custom then was for the harp to be passed around from hand to hand after meals and for each of the diners to play it and sing. Caedmon knew he was equally unskilled at music and lyrics. One night among many, Caedmon, who was dining with his companions in the hall of the monastery, watched the feared harp come toward him. And then, so as not to say what he had said so many times before, what everybody knew he would say, he rose without any pretext whatsoever and left. It must have been winter, because he went to the stable and lay down to sleep with the stable animals, who probably were few in number. It was the seventh century, and England was a poor country, marshy, with winters even harsher than they are now. Poor Caedmon fell asleep, and in his dreams he saw someone, probably an angel, and this someone—psychologists can easily explain this, and those of us who are not psychologists can as well—this someone gave him a harp and told him, "Sing." In his dream, poor Caedmon spoke as

he had so often with his fellows, saying “I don’t know how to sing.” And the other said, “Sing of the origin of creation.” So Caedmon, in wonderment, composed a poem. Then he awoke and remembered the poem he had composed. The poem has been preserved, and it is not very good. It is basically the first verses of Genesis, which he must have heard, more or less amplified and with some words changed. They were all so astonished by this that they had him go speak with the monastic authorities. The abbess heard the verses, she thought they were very good, but she wanted to carry out a test. She ordered one of the priests to read Caedmon the following verses of Genesis and told him to versify them. The next day, Caedmon, who was illiterate, came with a verse version of the passage, which they transcribed, and Caedmon continued versifying the Pentateuch until the day he died. Bede says that in England, many have sung well, but that nobody sang as well as he did, because the others had men as teachers, and he had God or his angel as his teacher. And Caedmon predicted the hour of his death, and he was so certain of it and his posthumous fate that just before this hour, he was asleep rather than in prayer. And so he passed from one dream to another—from sleep to death—and it has been said that we should rest assured that he met his angel in the other world. So Caedmon dies, leaving behind some mediocre verses—I’ve read them—and a beautiful legend.⁸ And as we shall see later, when we read the work of Coleridge and Stevenson, this is part of a literary tradition that seems to be deeply rooted in England: the tradition of versifying in one’s sleep.

After Caedmon, there came other religious poets, the most famous of whom is Cynewulf, whose name means “bold wolf.” The oddest thing about Cynewulf, whose poems are paraphrases of the Bible, is the habit he had of “signing” his poems. There are poets who have done this, of course, in a much more efficient way than Cynewulf. Perhaps the most famous is the American poet, Walt Whitman, who speaks about himself in his poems, saying: “*Walt Whitman, un*

cosmos, hijo de Manhattan, turbulento, sensual, paternal, comiendo, bebiendo, sebrando."⁹ And he has a poem that says: "*Qué ves, Walt Whitman?*" ["What do you see, Walt Whitman?"] And he responds, "*Veo una redonda maravilla que gira por el espacio.*" ["I see a great round wonder rolling through space."] And then: "*Qué oyes, Walt Whitman?*" ["What do you hear Walt Whitman?"] At the end, he sends best wishes to all the countries of the world, "from me and America sent."¹⁰ Ronsard did the same in a sonnet.¹¹ And Lugones has also done it, kind of in jest.¹² Somebody asks in *Lunario sentimental*, "*El poeta ha tomado sus lecciones / Quién es? / Leopoldo Lugones / Doctor en Lunología*" ["The poet has had his lessons / Who is he? / Leopoldo Lugones, Doctor of Lunology."] But Cynewulf chose another way. This practice is common among Persians, and it seems the Persians did it so that others wouldn't claim their poems as their own. For example, the great Persian poet Hafiz mentions himself many times, always in praise, in his poems. He says, for example, "Hafiz," and someone answers, "The angels in the sky have learned your latest poems by heart." Now, Cynewulf—remember that the detective novel is a genre typical of the English language, although it was invented in the United States by Edgar Allan Poe—Cynewulf anticipates cryptography, using the letters of his own name to make a poem about the Final Judgment.¹³ He says, "C and Y kneel in prayer; N sends up its supplications; E trusts in God; W and U know they will go to Heaven; L and F tremble." And this is written in Runic letters.

Runic letters were the ancient alphabet of all the Germanic peoples.¹⁴ These letters were not made for cursive writing. They were made to be engraved or etched into stone or metal. (A knife with the letters of the runic alphabet was found in the Thames.) These letters had magic properties; they were closely linked to ancient religion. So Cynewulf writes his poems using the Latin alphabet, learned from the Romans, but when he gets to letters that are

meaningful, he uses the runic letters, which the Saxons, as well as the Norsemen, used, for the writing of epigraphs. These letters—I don't know if you have seen them—have sharp corners; they are angular, because they were designed to be carved into stone or metal with a knife, as opposed to cursive writing that tends to have rounder shapes, and better suits the hand. In England, there are monuments carved with runic letters. One is etched with the first verses of "The Dream of the Rood," a poem we will look at later. There was a Swedish scholar who said that the Greeks had copied the runic letters from the Germanic peoples for their alphabet. This is totally improbable. Most likely Phoenician and Roman coins made their way north and the people in the north learned the runic alphabet from them.

As for the origin of the name, it is strange. The word *runin* Saxon means "whisper," or what is spoken in a low voice. And that means "mystery," because what is spoken in a low voice is what one doesn't want others to hear. So *runes* means "mysteries"; letters are mysteries. But this can also refer to the wonder primitive peoples felt at the fact that words could be communicated through those primitive written symbols. Clearly for them the fact that a piece of wood contained signs and that those signs could be transformed into sounds, words, was very strange. Another explanation is that only erudite people knew how to read, and so the letters were called "mysteries" because the common people didn't know them. These are several different explanations for the word *rune*. And since I've now used the word *runic*, I would like to remind you that in the British Cemetery, you can see crosses that are mistakenly called "runic."¹⁵ These are crosses with a circular shape, usually of reddish or gray stone. The cross inside the circle is carved. They are of Celtic origin: in general, the Celts and the Germanic peoples did not like open spaces. In a painting, for example, they didn't want there to be any empty space—maybe they thought this showed that the

painter was lazy. I don't know what I heard about a painting that was recently on exhibit that was just a white canvas, nothing else. Which is similar to a concert that was performed in Paris a while back; it lasted three-quarters of an hour and consisted of the instruments remaining absolutely silent. It is a way to avoid all mistakes, and also to do without any knowledge of music. There was a French composer from the last century who said: "*pour rendre le silence en musique*," "to express silence in music, I would need three military bands." Which seems more intelligent, surely, than expressing silence through silence. In any case, these runic crosses are round. Inside is the cross, but the cross has shafts that meet. There always remains a small space between the four arms of the cross, but this is decorated with intersecting lines, something like a chess board. And we might think that this style is akin to the poetic style in which everything is intertwined, everything is expressed through metaphors. In other words, they liked what was intricate and baroque, even though they were very simple people.

The Christian poems are, to my mind, the least worthwhile of Anglo-Saxon poetry. Except the elegies. Now, these poems are not strictly Christian; though written in the ninth century, they already have romantic elements. Above all, they have one extraordinary feature: they are personal poems. In the Middle Ages, there was nothing like this in any region of Europe. Because a poet sang of the king or the battle, he sang what his listeners could feel. But the so-called Anglo-Saxon elegies—soon we shall see that the word "elegy" is not altogether appropriate—are *personal* poems, some of which start being personal as of the very first line. They have been called "elegies" but "elegy" really means a poem written to lament someone's death. However, those poems are called "elegies" not because they lament a death but rather because of their melancholic tone. I don't know who gave them that name, but that's how they are known, and they constitute the contribution, the first personal

contribution, by the Anglo-Saxons to Germanic poetry. Other than “The Battle of Maldon,” which we have seen abounds in specific descriptions that anticipate the Norse sagas, which come much later, everything else we have seen that was written in England theoretically could have been written elsewhere. We can easily imagine, for example, a poet from Germany or the Low Countries, or from Scandinavia, taking the Norse legend of Beowulf and turning it into a poem, or a Danish poet telling the story of the Danish warriors at Finn castle, or a poet from any other tribe singing of his people’s victory, as did the author of the fragment about Brunanburh. On the other hand, these elegies are individual, and one of them, which has been called “The Seafarer,” begins with lines that anticipate “Song of Myself,” by Walt Whitman.¹⁶ It begins like this: “I can sing a true song about myself, I can sing of my travels,” “*Mæg ic be me sylfum soðgied wrecan, sipas secgan.*” This was totally revolutionary in the Middle Ages. This poem has been translated by the famous contemporary poet, Ezra Pound. When I read Ezra Pound’s version many years ago, it seemed absurd. Because I could not have guessed, by reading it, that the poet had his own personal theory about translation. The poet believed—as did Verlaine, let’s say, as did many others, and perhaps they were right—that the most important thing in a poem is not the meaning of the words but the sound. Which is, of course, true. I don’t know if I’ve already mentioned the example of “*La princesa está pálida / en su silla de oro*” [“The princess is pale on her golden chair”].¹⁷ This line is beautiful, but if we, say, use the same words, but place them in a different order, we see that the poetry disappears. If we say, for example, “*En su silla de oro está pálida la princesa,*” nothing at all is left of the poem. And this is the case with so many poems, perhaps with all poems, except, of course, narrative poetry.

Now, here’s how Ezra Pound translated those lines: “May I for my own self song’s truth reckon, / Journey’s

jargon.”¹⁸ This is barely comprehensible, but as sound it resembles the Saxon. “May I for my own self” (this is about myself)—“song’s truth reckon” sounds like “*Mæg ic be me sylfum soðgied wrecan, sipas secgan,*” and then “journey’s jargon” repeats the alliteration of “*sipas secgan.*” *Secgan* is of course the same word as “say.” But we will delve into an analysis of this poem and another one called “The Ruin”—a poem inspired by the ruins in the city of Bath—in the next class. I will also speak about the strangest of all Saxon poems, the oddest one from that period, whose title is “The Dream of the Rood.” And after talking about these poems, and after we have analyzed the distinctive elements contained in the last one I mentioned—in other words, after we have looked at the Christian and pagan elements in that poem’s composition (because in the last poem, “The Dream of the Rood,” although the poet is a devout Christian and perhaps even a mystic, there remain elements of the ancient Germanic epic)—after that, I will say a few words about the end of the Saxons in England, and I will discuss the Battle of Hastings, which, true or not, is one of the most dramatic events in the history of England and the history of the world.

CLASS 6

THE ORIGINS OF POETRY IN ENGLAND. THE ANGLO-SAXON ELEGIES. CHRISTIAN POETRY: "THE DREAM OF THE ROOD."

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 26, 1966

The story of the origins of English poetry is quite mysterious. As we know, all that remains of what was written in England from the fifth century—let's say, from the year 449—until a little after the Norman Conquest in the year 1066, besides the laws and the prose, is what has been preserved by chance in four codices, or books of manuscripts. These codices suggest the existence of a prior literature that was quite rich. The oldest texts are charms, remedies for curing rheumatic pain or making barren lands fertile. There is one to protect against a swarm of bees. Here, they reflect ancient Saxon mythology, which has since been lost; we can only guess at it, based on its affinity with Norse mythology, which has been preserved. For example, in a charm against rheumatic pain, the valkyries, without being named, unexpectedly appear.¹ The verses say, "They were loud" or . . . sonorous, yes, "sonorous, as they rode through the hills. They were determined, as they rode through the land. Mighty women . . . " And then the text is lost, and at the end of the charm there is a Christian incantation, because the sorcerer, the witch doctor, the wizard, says, "I will help you," and says, "If God is willing." This is a Christian verse, apparently written later. Then in another line, in another stanza, it says that this pain will be cured "if

it be the work of witchcraft, if the work of gods"—"*esa geweorc*," *ese* being the Norse gods—"if the work of elves."²

Until now we have looked at the epic tradition, from *Beowulf* and the Finnsburh Fragment, until its last appearance in the ballad of "The Battle of Maldon," which prefigures, with its abundance of circumstantial details, the later Icelandic prose sagas and narratives. But a revolution takes place in the ninth century. We don't know if those who made it were even aware of it. We don't know if the pieces that have been preserved were even the first. But something very important takes place, perhaps the most important thing that can take place in poetry: the discovery of a new inflection. Often, when journalists talk about a new poet, they say "a new voice." Here the phrase would have that meaning exactly: there is a new voice, a new inflection, a new use of language. And this must have been rather difficult, for the Anglo-Saxon language—Old English—was by its very harshness destined for epic poetry, in other words, to celebrate courage and loyalty. This is why, in the pieces of epic poetry we have looked at, what these poets do best is describe battles. As if we can hear the sound of swords clashing, the blow of spears against shields, the tumult and shouts of the battlefield. In the ninth century, there appear what have come to be called the "Anglo-Saxon elegies." This poetry is not the poetry of the battlefield. These are personal poems. Moreover, solitary poems, poems by men expressing their solitude and their melancholy. And this is something totally new in the ninth century, when poetry was generic, when the poet sang of the triumphs and defeats of his clan, of his king. Here, on the contrary, the poet speaks personally, anticipating the romantic movement, which we will study when we look at English poetry of the eighteenth century. I have speculated—this is my personal speculation, not to be found in any book I know—that this melancholic and personal poetry might have come from the Celtic tradition, that it could be of Celtic origin. It seems improbable, if we think carefully about it, to

assume, as is common, that the Saxons, the Anglos, and the Jutes, when they invaded England, slaughtered the entire population. It is more natural to assume that they kept the men as slaves and the women as their concubines. There would be no point in killing the entire population. Moreover, this can be verified in England today: the purely Germanic type, that is, the lineage of people who are tall, blond, or red-haired, belongs to the Northern counties and Scotland. In the south and to the west, where the primitive inhabitants took refuge, there are many people of average height and with brown hair. In Wales, there are a lot of people with black hair. In the north, in the Scottish Highlands, also. In addition, surely, there are many blond people in England who are not of Saxon but rather of Norse origin. This can be seen in Northumberland, Yorkshire, and the Scottish Lowlands. And this mixture of Saxons and Norsemen with Celts could have produced—here we are obviously in the realm of speculation—the so-called Anglo-Saxon elegies. In the last class, I said they are called elegies because of their melancholic tone, for they are not elegies in the sense that they mourn the death of an individual. In the last class, we looked at the beginning of one of the most famous of these elegies, “The Seafarer,” which starts out with a personal declaration. The poet says that he will sing a true song about himself and will tell of his travels. Then comes an enumeration of all the rigors of the life of a seafaring man. He talks about the storms, the night-watch on the boat. He talks about the cold and the boat crashing against the cliffs. Here is the theme of the sea, which is one of the eternal, constant themes in English poetry. And there are strange images. But not strange in the way that the kennings, which have something fabricated about them, are strange. Calling, for example, the tongue the “oar of the mouth” is not a natural metaphor, in the sense that there is no deep affinity between the two things: here we see the Saxon—the Norseman—man of letters looking for new metaphors. In “The Seafarer,” we have lines such as “*norþan sniwde*,” “it snowed from the north”; and

then "*hægl feol on eorþan*," "hail fell on the earth"; and "*corna caldast*," "coldest of grains," or "of seeds." And it seems strange to compare the ice, the snow, the hail—in short: the cold, death—to seeds, which symbolize life. When we read this we feel that the poet has not, like a scholar, sought a contrast, but rather that he saw the hail, and when he saw it falling, he thought of seeds falling.

In the first part of the poem, the poet, who is a seafaring man, talks about the hardships of the sea. He talks about the cold, the winter, the storms, the perils of a sailor's life. And at that time those perils would have been tremendous in the tremendous North Sea in those small and fragile boats. Then he says that little can be known of these hardships by those who enjoy the pleasures of life in the cities, in the modest cities of the time. He talks about the summer—the summer was the preferred time for sailing, for at other times the ice floes blocked the sea. And then he says, "The guardian of summer sings . . ."—I think this is the cuckoo—"boding bitter sorrows," "*singeð sumeres weard, sorge beodeð / bitter in breosthord*," *breosthord* is "the treasure of the chest," in other words, the heart. This kenning here, "the treasure of the chest," was clearly a well-known phrase when the poet used it. Saying "treasure of the chest" was like saying "heart."

The poet talks about the storms, and just when we think that this poem is simply about these hardships, there is a surprise, because the poet is talking not only about the hardships but also—we will encounter this theme in Swinburne, in Kipling, and in others—about his fascination with the sea. And this is a particularly English theme. And this is only natural, for if we look on a globe at England—so important in the history of the world—we see that it is a small island torn off the western- and northern-most reaches of Europe. What I mean is that if you showed a globe to a person who was ignorant of history, this person would never think that such a slip of an island torn by the sea—that slip of an island, penetrated by the sea on all sides—would

become the center of an empire. But that's just what happened. There is a common saying in English, "to run away to the sea," referring to those who run away from their families to take their chances in the dangerous North Sea.

So there are a few lines that come as a total surprise to the reader that speak about those who feel their vocation is the sea. They speak about a man who is a seafarer by nature. And the verses say, "He has no spirit for the harp, nor for the passing out of rings"—remember that the kings passed out rings in their halls—"nor for the pleasure of women, nor for the pomp of this world. He only seeks the high and salty currents." These contrary sentiments combine in the elegy of the seafarer: there are the dangers, the storms, and also this affinity for the sea.

Now, there are those who have interpreted the entire poem as allegorical. They say that the sea symbolizes life with its storms and perils, and that an affinity with the sea means an affinity with life. We should not forget that people in the Middle Ages possessed the ability to read a poem on two different levels. In other words, those who read this poem thought about the sea, about the seafarer, and they also thought that the sea could be an allegory or a symbol for life. There is a much later text, written many centuries later (though it is a medieval text as well), Dante's epistle to Cangrande della Scala, in which Dante tells him that he wrote his poem, the greatest poem of all of literature, *The Divine Comedy*, to be read in four different ways.³ It could be read as the portrayal of the life of a sinner, a penitent, an adventurer, a just man. Even more, it can be read as a description of hell, purgatory, and heaven. Later, we will read a poem by Langland that has caused contemporary readers more than a little perplexity; they read the parts as if they were consecutive, but apparently the poem is instead a series of visions.⁴ These visions become facets of the same thing. In our day, we have poets like George or Pound, who do not want their poems to be read consecutively—difficult

as this is to honor in our era—but rather for the reader to have patience and to read them as different facets of one poetic object.⁵ Apparently the ability to do this, which we have now lost or almost lost, was very common during the Middle Ages. Readers or listeners felt they could interpret a text in different ways. And jumping ahead now to what will come much later, we can say that Chesterton’s detective stories are written to be read as fantasy stories, but also as parables. And this is, in fact, what is going on in the seafarer’s elegy. At the end of the elegy, the poem is strictly, explicitly, symbolic. And this clearly did not present any difficulty in the ninth century. We must not assume, then, that we are necessarily more complex than the men of the Middle Ages, who were men well versed in theology and theological subtleties. We have surely gained a lot, but it is also possible that we have lost something.

This, then, is one of the elegies. There is another one, “The Wanderer.” Here the theme is one that surely had social importance in the Middle Ages, of the man who has lost his protector—his lord—in battle, and is looking for another. The man has been left outside society. This is very important in a stratified society like that of the Middle Ages. A man who lost his protector was left alone, and it is natural that he would lament his misfortune. The poem begins by speaking about the lonely man—the man who seeks the protection of a lord and who has “sorrow and longing as companions”—and about exile as “cold as winter.” “Destiny has been fulfilled,” it then says. Here, we can think about the general context of life, but also the particular case of a man who finds no support. He says his friends have died in battle, his lord has died, and he is alone. This is another famous elegy.

Then we have one that is titled “The Ruin,” which takes place in the city of Bath, where there are still ruins of the great Roman baths, which I have seen.⁶ And those constructions themselves must have seemed prodigious to the poor Saxons, who at first knew only how to build houses

out of wood. I already said that the Roman cities and roads were much too complex for those invaders who arrived from Denmark, the Low Countries, the mouth of the Rhine, and for whom a city, a street—a street where there were houses next to each other—was something mysterious and incomprehensible. The poem begins by saying, “Marvelous, prodigious is the carved stone of this wall, laid waste by fate,” “*wyrde gebræcon*.” Then it talks about how the city was destroyed, then about the water that flows out of the thermal fountains, and the poet imagines the parties that must have taken place in these streets, and wonders: “Where is the horse? Where is the rider? Where the givers of gold?”—the kings. And he imagines them with shining armor, he imagines them drunk on wine, haughty, shining with gold, and he wonders what happened to those generations. Then he sees the crumbling walls, the wind blowing through the rooms. Little is left of the adornments. He sees walls carved with snakes, and all of this fills him with melancholy.⁷ And since I’ve used the word “melancholy,” I want to mention that this word has had a very curious fate. “Melancholy” means “black humors,” and currently the word “melancholy” is a sad word for us. A long time ago, melancholy meant “humor,” or physical bile, that when predominant, caused a melancholic temperament.

Now, we will never know if these English poets, possibly of Celtic origin, realized what an extraordinary, revolutionary thing they were doing. It’s very possible they didn’t. I don’t think there were literary schools at that time. I think they wrote these verses because they felt them, and that they didn’t know they were doing something so extraordinary: how they were forcing an iron language, an epic language, to say something for which that language had not been forged—to express sadness and personal loneliness. But they managed to do it.

We also have a poem, possibly somewhat prior, called “Deor’s Lament.”⁸ All we know about Deor is that he was a

poet in a German court, in Prussia, who lost the king's favor and was replaced by another bard. The king took away the lands he had given him. Deor found himself alone and was then imagined as a dramatic character by a poet in England whose name has been lost. In the poem, Deor consoles himself by thinking about past misfortunes. He thinks about Welund—called *Völund* in Norse poetry and *Wieland* in Germany—who was a warrior. And this warrior was taken prisoner—he was a kind of northern Daedalus—and he constructed wings out of swan feathers and escaped by flying out of his prison cell, like Daedalus; but not before he raped the king's daughter. The poem begins by saying, "As for Welund, he knew exile among snakes." It is possible that these snakes were not real; it's possible the snakes were a metaphor for the swords he forged . . . "*Welund him be wurman wræces cunnade*," and then this "determined man, he knew exile," and it also says, "exile as cold as winter." Now that, which is not a strange phrase for us, must have seemed strange when it was written. Because it would have been most natural to interpret it as "cold exile of winter," but not "exile as cold as winter," which corresponds to a much more complex mentality. And then, after enumerating some of Welund's misfortunes, comes this refrain: "*Þæs ofereode, þisses swa mæg*." "That passed, so too shall this," and this refrain is an important invention, because while we have already seen that alliterated poetry did not allow for the formation of stanzas, the refrain does allow it. Then the poet remembers another misfortune: that of the princess whose brothers were killed by Welund. He recalls her sadness upon seeing that she was pregnant. And then it says, again, "That passed, so too shall this." Then the poet recalls tyrants, real or historic, or legendary, out of the Germanic tradition, among whom appears Eormenric, the king of the Goths. All of this is remembered in England. He talks about Eormenric and his wolf's heart: Eormenric "who ruled that vast Goth nation," "*ahte wide folc*," that "vast nation." "*Gotena rices*" is "the king of the Goths." Then he

adds: "*þæt wæs grim cyning*," "that one was a cruel king," and then he says, "All that passed, so too shall this."

We have discussed the Anglo-Saxon elegies, and we will now turn to the poems that are actually Christian. We will talk about one of the most curious of the so-called Anglo-Saxon elegies. This poem recounts a vision that was possibly real, possibly a literary invention. It is usually titled "The Dream of the Rood," though others translate it, using latinate words, "The Vision of the Cross." And the poem starts out by saying, "Yes, now I will tell the most precious of dreams," or visions, for in the Middle Ages they didn't distinguish very clearly between visions and dreams. [T. S.] Eliot says that we no longer believe in dreams very much, assigning to them a physiological or psychoanalytic origin. Whereas in the Middle Ages, people believed in the divine origin of dreams, and this made them dream better dreams.

The poet begins by saying, "*Hwæt! Ic swefna cyst secgan wylle*." "Yes, I wish to tell the most precious of dreams, one that came to me at midnight, when men capable of speech, capable of the word, take their rest." In other words, when the world is silent. And the poet says that he thinks he sees a tree, the most resplendent of trees. He says that the tree emerged from the earth and grew toward the heavens. Then he describes that tree almost cinematically. He says he saw it changing, sometimes dripping with blood, sometimes covered with jewels and rich garments. And he says that this tall tree rising from the earth to the heavens is worshipped by men on Earth, by the fortunate, and by the angels in heaven. And he says, "*leohte bewunden, beama beorhtost*," "It grew into the air, this most resplendent of trees." And that he, upon seeing this tree worshipped by men and angels, felt ashamed, felt how tainted he was by his sins. And then, unexpectedly, the tree begins to speak, as it will speak centuries later in the famous inscription in hell, on the gate into hell. Those dark-colored words Dante sees over the gate: "*Per me si va ne la città dolente, / per me si va ne l'eterno dolore, / per me si*

va tra la perduta gente," and then "*queste parole di colore oscuro,*" and that's when we find out that the words are written on the gates of hell.⁹ This was one of Dante's marvelous qualities. He didn't start by saying, "I saw a gate, and over the gate were these words." He begins with the words written over the gates of hell, which would have been carved with capital letters.

But now, something even stranger occurs. The tree, which we now realize is the cross, speaks. And it speaks like a living being, like a man who wants to remember something that took place a long time before, something he is about to forget, so he is summoning up his memories. And the tree says, "This took place many years ago, I still remember, that I was hewn on the edge of the forest. My powerful enemies felled me." Then he recounts how those enemies carried him and planted him on a hill, and how they made him the gallows for the guilty, the fugitives.

Then Christ appears. And the tree asks for forgiveness, to be forgiven for not having fallen on the enemies of Christ. And this poem, full of deep and true mystic sentiment, hearkens back to ancient Germanic sentiment. Then, when Christ speaks, he is called "that young hero who was All-Powerful God," "*þa geong hæleð, þæt wæs god ælmihtig.*" Then they nail Christ to the cross with dark nails, "*mid deorcan næglum.*" And the cross trembles when it feels Christ's embrace. It is as if the cross were Christ's woman, his wife; the cross shares the pain of the crucified God. Then they raise it up with Christ, who is dying. And then for the first time in the poem—for until now it uses the word *beam*, like the modern English word, which meant tree; in other words, the tree was a tree until the moment the young man embraced it, and the two trembled as in a nuptial embrace—then the tree says: "*Rod wæs ic aræred.*"¹⁰ "[As a] cross was I raised." The tree was not a cross until that moment. Then the cross describes how the Earth goes dark, how the sea trembles, how the veil of the temple is torn. The cross is

identified with Christ. Then it describes the sadness of the universe when Christ dies; and then the apostles arrive to bury Christ. And the cross calls them “the sad apostles of evening.” We don’t know if the poet was at all conscious of how well the words “sadness” and “evening” go together. It’s possible this sentiment was new at that time. The fact is, they buried Christ, and from then on the poem becomes diluted—as happens with almost all the Anglo-Saxon elegies, and as happened later with many passages in the Spanish picaresque novels—it becomes diluted with moral considerations. The cross says that on the day of the Final Judgment, those who believe in it, those who know how to repent, will be saved. In other words, the poet forgets his splendid personal invention of creating a story told by the cross of the Passion of Christ, and the fact that the cross considers Christ’s pain as well.

There are several Anglo-Saxon elegies. I think the most important are “The Seafarer”—in which the horror of and fascination for the sea coexist—and this extraordinary “Vision of the Cross,” in which the cross speaks as if it were a living being. There are other Christian poems that are derived from episodes of the Bible. For example, “Judith,” who kills Holofernes. We have a poem derived from Exodus, and this poem has a feature that is not essentially poetic, but is interesting because it shows us how far away the Saxons were from the Bible. The poet has to describe the Israelites being pursued by the Egyptians as they cross the Red Sea. He has to describe the sea that parts to allow them to pass, then drowns the Egyptians. The poet doesn’t really know how to describe the Israelites. So, since they are crossing the sea, and he has to use words to describe them as seafarers, he uses a word that is most unexpected for us today. When speaking about the Israelites crossing the Red Sea, he calls them “Vikings.” Naturally, for him the ideas of “seafarer” and “Viking” were closely linked.

We are now very close to the end of the Saxons. England has already been invaded by the Norsemen, and

would soon be invaded by the Normans. (In the next class, we will look at the tragic end of the Saxon reign in England.) The Saxons will remain in England, and they will remain there as vassals, just as the Britons were vassals of the Saxons. The Norsemen were for the Saxons what the Saxons were for the Britons, that is, pirates and then overlords. The history of this conquest has been preserved for us in the *History of the Kings of Norway*, by Snorri Sturluson, and in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.^{[11](#)} And before talking about what happened to the English language, I want to spend some time in the next class talking about what took place in the year 1066, the year of the Battle of Hastings. Then we will see how the language changes, what happens to the English language and to its literature.

CLASS 7

THE TWO BOOKS WRITTEN BY GOD. THE ANGLO-SAXON
BESTIARY. RIDDLES. "THE GRAVE." THE BATTLE OF
HASTINGS.

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 28, 1966

Throughout the Middle Ages, the idea held sway that God had written two books. One of these books, needless to say, was sacred scripture—the Bible—dictated to various people at various times by the Holy Spirit. The other book was the Universe, and all its creatures. It was said repeatedly that the duty of every Christian was to study both books, the holy book and the other enigmatic book, the Universe. In the seventeenth century, Bacon—Francis Bacon—returns to this idea, but in a scientific manner. The idea is that we have sacred scripture on the one hand, and on the other, the Universe, which we must decipher. In the Middle Ages, however, we find this idea that the two books—the book par excellence, the Bible, and the other book, the Universe (naturally, we form part of the second book)—should be studied from an ethical perspective. That is, it was not a question of studying nature as Bacon did, as does modern science (conducting experiments, investigating physical things), but rather of seeking moral examples in it. And this persists today, in fables about the bee or the ant that teach us to work hard, in the idea that the grasshopper is lazy, etcetera. In all the literatures of Europe can be found books called “physiologies.”¹ In this case, the word means “doctors,” or “bestiaries” because the subjects were animals,

real or imaginary. So, for example, the Phoenix. People believed in the Phoenix, which became a symbol of resurrection because it burns up, dies, then is reborn. In Old English, in Anglo-Saxon, there was also a bestiary. It seems that the original bestiary, or what has been considered the original, was written in Egypt in the Greek language, and this is why it includes so many Egyptian animals, both real and imaginary, such as the Phoenix, which goes to the holy city of Heliopolis, the city of the sun, to die.

Only two chapters from the Anglo-Saxon bestiary have been preserved. These chapters are curious because they are about the panther and the whale. Amazingly enough, the panther is a symbol of Christ.² This might surprise us, but we must also remember that for the Saxons of England, for the Anglo-Saxons, *panther* was merely a word in the Bible. Naturally, they had never seen a panther—an animal that lives in other parts of the globe. And there was a text, I don't remember which verse of scripture, about the panther, where it is identified with Christ. And so it says there, in the Anglo-Saxon text about the panther—it was thought to have many colors, that is, to have spots, to be a brilliant, dazzling animal, this panther who is identified with Christ—the text says that the panther is an animal with a musical voice and sweet breath, which does not appear to be borne out by zoos, or zoology. It says that it sleeps for many months, then awakens, which might correspond to the days Christ is dead before he is resurrected, and that it is a gentle animal, that men come from the cities and the countryside to hear its musical voice, and that it has only one enemy: the dragon. Thus, the dragon becomes the symbol of the devil.

There is an expression I have never been able to figure out, and perhaps you can help me solve it. It is a verse from Eliot, I think it is in his *Four Quartets*. It says: "Came Christ, the tiger."³ Now, I don't know if Eliot's identification of Christ with the tiger is based on some memory he has of an ancient Saxon text that identifies Christ with the panther

(which is a tiger), or if Eliot is simply seeking to evoke surprise—though I don't think so, for that would be too easy. Christ is always compared to the lamb, a docile creature, and he may have been looking for the opposite. But if this were the case, I don't think he would have thought of the tiger, but rather the wolf (though perhaps the wolf seemed to him too easy a contrast to the lamb). Eliot's verse says, "In the juvenescence of the year"—he does not use the word "youth," but rather an old word, from Middle English, "juvenescence"—"Came Christ, the tiger." And this is, undoubtedly, astonishing. But I think that when we read Eliot, we must assume that when he wrote his poem, he was trying to do something more than surprise his reader. Surprise, as a literary effect, is a momentary effect, quite quickly spent.

So we have this pious poem about the panther, the panther that is then understood to be a symbol for Christ, an instance of Christ given to mankind. And then we have the other poem, "The Whale," given the name Fastitocalon, which I believe, though I am not certain, is similar to the Greek word for sea turtle.⁴ So, this poem is about the whale. The Saxons were familiar with whales; as we have already seen, one of the classic metaphors for the sea is "whale road," which is good because the immensity of the whale seems to suggest or emphasize the immensity of the whale's environment, the sea. And the poem says that the whale is sleeping or pretending to sleep, and the sailors mistake it for an island and disembark upon it. The whale dives down and devours them. Here the whale becomes a symbol of hell. Now, maybe we can find this idea of sailors mistaking a whale for an island in Irish legend.⁵ I recall an engraving that depicts a whale, clearly not an island, which is also smiling, and then there is a small boat. And Saint Brendan is in the small boat, bearing a cross and about to disembark very carefully onto the whale, who is laughing at him.⁶ We can also find this in *Paradise Lost* by Milton, where he

describes a whale sailors often encounter near the coast of Norway, and they disembark on it, and light a fire, and the fire rouses the whale, and the whale plunges down and devours the sailors. And here we see Milton's poetic touch. He could have said that the whale was "haply slumbering on the Norway sea." But he doesn't say this. He says "on the Norway foam," which is much more beautiful.⁷

So, we have these fragments, and then there is a long Anglo-Saxon poem about the Phoenix, which begins with a description of Earthly Paradise. Earthly Paradise is imagined as a high mountain plain in the Orient. Also in Dante's purgatory, Earthly Paradise is on the very peak of a kind of artificial mountain or system of terraces—purgatory. And in the Saxon poem, Earthly Paradise is described in words that echo others in the *Odyssey*. It says, for example, that there is no extreme cold or heat, or summer or winter; there is no hail or rain, and the heat of the sun is not oppressive. And then the Phoenix, one of the animals dealt with in Pliny's *Natural History*, is described. And here we can observe that although Pliny talks about griffins, or dragons, or the Phoenix, it doesn't mean that he believes in them.⁸ I think there is a different explanation. The explanation is that Pliny wanted to collect everything about animals in one volume, so he included the real and the imaginary, in order to make the text more complete. But he himself at times says, "which is doubtful," or "it is said that," whereby we see that we should not think of him as naïve but rather as someone with a different concept of what a natural history should be. Such a history had to include what was definitely known, not only about all animals but also about superstitions. I think, for example, that he believed that rubies make men invisible, emeralds make them eloquent, etcetera. I mean no, he did *not* believe these things. He knew that these superstitions existed. And he included them in his book, as well.

I have mentioned these two pieces from the Anglo-Saxon bestiary because they are curious, not because they

have any absolute poetic value. There is also a series of Anglo-Saxon riddles, riddles that are not meant to be ingenious the way Greek enigmas are.⁹ You might remember, for example, the famous riddle of the Sphinx: “What animal goes on four legs in the morning, on two at noon, and on three in the evening?” And it turns out that this is an extended metaphor for the life of man, who crawls when he is a child, who is a biped, who stands on two feet at noon, and then, in old age—which is compared to twilight—he leans on a cane.¹⁰ Rather than ingenious, the Anglo-Saxon enigmas are poetic descriptions of things; there are some whose solution is unknown, and others whose solution is obvious. For example, there is one about the book moth, and it says it is a thief who enters the library at night and feeds on the words of wise men but learns nothing. So, we understand it is about the book moth. And then there is one about the nightingale, how men hear it. There is another about the swan, the sound its wings make, and another about the fish: it says that it is errant and that its home—the river, obviously—is also errant, but that if you remove it from its home, it dies. Obviously, a fish dies out of water. In other words, the Anglo-Saxon enigmas are more like leisurely poems, not ingenious, but with a very vivid sense of nature. (We have already seen that one of the characteristics of English literature from the time of its beginnings is a feeling for nature.) Then we have biblical poems, which are mere extensions of biblical texts, oratorical extensions, greatly inferior to the sacred texts that inspired their authors. And then we have others that take up themes of common German mythology or legend, and we have looked at the most important of these, I believe, the epic texts: *Beowulf*, the Finnsburh Fragment, and “The Battle of Brunanburh,” splendidly translated by Tennyson—you will find that exemplary translation of “The Battle of Brunanburh” in any edition of Tennyson’s works—and the “Battle of Maldon,” of which I have yet to find an exemplary translation, but you

will find it translated literally in [Robert K.] Gordon's *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*.¹¹

And then there is a very sad poem, a poem written after the Norman Conquest and admirably translated by the American poet Longfellow, who also translated Manrique's *Coplas* from Spanish, *The Divine Comedy* from Italian, and then translated many cantos of the Norsemen and the Provençal troubadours.¹² He translated the German romantic poets, as well as German ballads. He was a man of vast learning, and during the years of the American Civil War, in order to distract himself from the war—the bloodiest war of the nineteenth century—he translated in its entirety *The Divine Comedy*, as I said, into hendecasyllables, blank verse, without rhymes. Now, the poem "The Grave" is a very

strange poem.¹³ It is thought to have been written during the eleventh or at the beginning of the twelfth century, that is, in the middle of the Middle Ages, in a Christian era. However, in this poem, "The Grave," there is no mention of the hope for heaven or the fear of hell. It is as if the poet believed only in physical death, in the decay of the body, and imagined, moreover—like in the story by our Eduardo Wilde, "*La primera noche de cementerio*" ["The First Night in the Graveyard"]—that the dead are conscious of this decay.¹⁴

And the poem begins: "For you a house was built before you were born"—that is, for each of us there is already a place in the earth for us to be buried—"To you dust was given before you came out of your mother." "*-e wes molde imynt, er ðu of moder come.*" You can see that at the end there, it is very similar to English, the English shines through. Then it says, "Dark is that house" ... Forgive me, "Doorless is that house, and dark it is within," and in that late Old English, which is already foreshadowing, prefiguring English, it says "*Dureleas is þet hus and dearc hit is wiðinnen.*" Already with this Anglo-Saxon, we are approaching English, even though there are no words of Latin origin. Then the house is described. It says that house

does not have a very high roof, that the roof is built touching the chest, that it is very low, “that there you will be very alone,” it says, “you will leave behind your friends, no friend will come down and ask you if you like that house.” Then it says, “the house is locked and death has the key.” Then there are more verses—four additional verses written by a different hand than the one that wrote the others, for the tone is different. Because it says: “No hand will stroke your hair,” and that expresses a tenderness that seems to be an afterthought, because the whole poem is very sad, very harsh. The whole poem becomes a single metaphor: the metaphor of the grave as man’s last abode. But this poem was written with so much intensity that it is one of the great poems of English poetry. And Longfellow’s translation, which is usually included after it, is not only literal, but sometimes the poet follows the precise order, the same order as the Anglo-Saxon lines. Of all Anglo-Saxon literature, its language is the easiest, because it is closest to contemporary English.

There are many anthologies of Anglo-Saxon poetry, and there is one published in Switzerland—I don’t remember the name of the author—that adheres to a very intelligent criterion, as follows: rather than begin with *Beowulf* or the Finnsburh Fragment, which are from the seventh or eighth century, it starts with the most recent, that is, what is closest to contemporary English. And then the anthology is retrospective, it goes backward to the Anglo-Saxon of the eighth century, after beginning with the Anglo-Saxon of the twelfth century; that is, as we proceed through the texts, they become more and more difficult, but the first ones, the ones at the beginning, help us.

We are now going to finish up this second unit, but we should also say a few words about history. To begin, I will talk about the history of the language so you can understand how Anglo-Saxon turned into contemporary English. Now, two key events occurred, and these two events, when they occurred, must have seemed catastrophic, terrible. They did,

however, prepare English to become what Alfonso Reyes called “the imperial language” of our century.¹⁵ That is to say, Anglo-Saxon was a far more complicated language, grammatically, than contemporary English. It had, as does German and the modern Norse languages, three genders. In Spanish we have two, and already this is complicated enough for foreigners. There is no reason that a table, *mesa*, is feminine in Spanish, or a clock, *reloj*, is masculine, for example; each one has to be learned. But in Old English, like in German and the Scandinavian languages, there are three grammatical genders. It’s as if we had a masculine “moon” (“*el luna*”), masculine “salt” (“*el sal*”), masculine “star” (“*el estrella*”). Now, it is assumed that the masculine “moon” belongs to a very ancient era, an era of matriarchy, an era when women were more important than men. Women ruled over the family, and so the brighter light—the sun—was considered feminine, and in Norse mythology we have, analogously, a goddess of the sun and a god of the moon. Now, I read in *El imperio jesuítico* [*The Jesuit Empire*] by Lugones—I assume Lugones is not mistaken—that the same thing happens in Guaraní, that in Guaraní, the sun is feminine and the moon is masculine.¹⁶ It is curious how this has influenced German poetry, for in German the moon is masculine, *der Mond*, just as *mona*, moon, was masculine in Old English, and *sunne*, sun, was feminine. (In *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Nietzsche compares the sun to a tomcat walking on a carpet of stars. But he does not say “eine Katze,” which could also be a she-cat, but rather “ein Kater,” a tomcat, a male. And he thought of the moon as a monk, not a nun, who gazes enviously at Earth.) So, grammatical gender, which is more or less random, influences poetry as well. And in [Old] English, the word for “woman” is neuter, *wif*, but there was a word, *wifmann*, and *mann* was masculine, so “woman” could be both masculine and feminine. In modern English, this is all much simpler. In Spanish, for example, we say *alto*, *alta*, *altos*, and *altas*; in

other words, the adjectives change according to the grammatical gender. In English we have only “high,” which can mean *alto*, *alta*, *altos*, or *altas*, depending on what follows. Now, what was it that brought about this simplification, that made contemporary English a much simpler language, grammatically, though much richer in vocabulary than Old English? It is the fact that the Vikings, Danes, and Norwegians settled in the north and the center of England. Now, Old Norse was similar to English. The Saxons had to communicate with the Norsemen, who had become their neighbors, and very soon, the Saxons began to mingle with the Norsemen, who were fewer in number. The Norse race blended with the Saxon race. They had to understand each other, so in order to do so, and as the vocabulary was already so similar, a kind of lingua franca emerged, and English became simpler.

And this must have been quite sad for educated Saxons. Just imagine if suddenly we noticed that people said “*el*” *cuchara*, “*lo*” *mesa*, “*la*” *tenedor*, etcetera. We would think: “Darn, the language is degenerating, we have reached the epitome of pidgin.” But the Saxons, who would have thought the same, could not foresee that this would make English an easier language. Notice how today English has almost no grammar. It is the simplest dictionary there is, grammatically. The pronunciation is what is difficult. As for English spelling, you all know about proper names, that when somebody suddenly becomes famous, people don’t know how to pronounce the person’s name. For example, when Somerset Maugham began to write, people would say “Mogem,” because there was no way of knowing how it was pronounced. And then we have the letters left over from the old pronunciation. For example, we have “knife.” Why is there a *k*? Because in Old English this was pronounced, and it has remained like some sort of lost fossil.¹⁷ And then we also have the word “knight” in contemporary English. This seems absurd, but it is because in Anglo-Saxon the word *cniht* meant “servant” or “attendant.” That is, [the initial c]

was pronounced. And then English became full of French words as a result of the Norman conquest.

And now we will discuss that year 1066, the year of the Battle of Hastings. Now, there are English historians who say that the English character was not yet fully developed at the time of the Norman invasion. Others say it was. I think the first are correct. I think that the Norman invasion was very important for the history of England, and naturally that means for the history of the world. I think that if the Normans had not invaded England, England today would be, let us say, another Denmark. That is, it would be a very educated country, and politically admirable, but a provincial country, a country that has exerted no great influence upon world history. The Normans, on the other hand, made possible the British Empire, as well as the spread of the English race all over the world. I think that had there been no Norman invasion, we would not have subsequently had a British Empire. That is, there would have been no Englishmen in Canada, in India, in South Africa, in Australia. Perhaps the United States would also not exist. In other words, world history would have been totally different. Because the Normans had managerial ability, an organizational sense, which the Saxons lacked. And we can see this even in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, written by a Saxon monk—the Saxons were enemies of the Normans. It deals with William the Conqueror, the bastard, who was Norman, and when he died, they said there had never been in England a more powerful king than he.¹⁸ Previously, the country had been divided into small kingdoms. It is true, there was Alfred the Great, but he never grasped the idea that England could be purely Anglo-Saxon or English.¹⁹ Alfred the Great died with the idea that most of England would be a Norse country, and the other part would be Saxon. The Normans arrived, however, and conquered England, that is, they went all the way to the border with Scotland. In addition, they were a very energetic people,

people with great organizational ability, with great religious sentiment as well, and they filled England with monasteries—although the Saxons, of course, already had religious sentiment. But let's take a look at the dramatic events of that year, 1066, in England. There was in England a king named Harold, son of Godwin. And Harold had a brother named Tostig.

In the county of Yorkshire, I saw a Saxon church built by the two brothers. I don't remember the inscription exactly, but I remember that I had it read to me, and I made a good impression because I translated it, which the English gentlemen accompanying me were unable to do, as they had not studied Anglo-Saxon. I have, more or less, but I may have cheated a bit on that church inscription. In England, there must still be about fifty or sixty Saxon churches. This was a small church. They are buildings of gray stone, square, rather meager. The Saxons were not great architects, though they became so later under Norman influence. After that, they had a different understanding of the Gothic style, because Gothic generally tends toward height. York Minster, the cathedral of York, is the longest cathedral in Europe. It has windows called "the York sisters." Cromwell's soldiers did not destroy these windows, as they are stained glass windows, with many colors, but predominantly yellow. And the designs are what today we would call abstract, that is, there are no figures. And they were not destroyed by Cromwell's soldiers, who destroyed all images because they considered them idols. But not the "York sisters," those precursors of abstract art; they were saved, and this is fortunate because they are really beautiful.

So, we have King Harold and his brother, Earl Toste or Tostig, depending on the text. Now, the earl believed that he had a right to part of the kingdom, that the king should divide England between them. King Harold did not agree, so Tostig left England and allied himself with the king of Norway, who was named Harald Hardrada, Harald the Resolute, the Hard. . . . Pity he has almost the same name as

Harold, but history cannot be changed. This personage is very interesting, because as is typical of many educated Norsemen, he was not only a warrior but also a poet. And it seems that during his last battle, the Battle of Stamford Bridge, he composed two poems. He composed one, recited it, then said, "It's not good."²⁰ So he composed another, which contained more kennings—metaphors—and that's why it seemed better to him. Moreover, this king had traveled to Constantinople and been in love with a Greek princess. He wrote—says [James Lewis] Farley, with a phrase that could have been from Hugo—"madrigals of iron."²¹ Earl Tostig, who also had a stake in England, went to Norway to seek an alliance with Harald. And they landed near a city that the Icelandic historian, Snorri Sturluson, called Jorvik, which is the present-day city of York.²² And there gathered, naturally, many Saxons who were his, not Harold's, supporters. He came with his army from the south. The two armies faced each other. It was morning.

I have already told you that battles at that time were somewhat like tournaments. Thirty or forty men from the Saxon army advanced on horseback. We can imagine them covered in armor, and the horses also might have armor. If you have seen *Alexander Nevsky*, it might help you imagine this scene.²³ And now I would like you to think about every word they are going to say. These words might very well have been invented by tradition, or by the Icelandic historian who records the scene, but each of the words is significant. So, these forty Saxon—I mean, English—horsemen approach the Norwegian army. And there was Earl Tostig, and next to him was the king of Norway, Harald. Now, when Harald disembarked on the coast of England, his horse tripped and fell. And he said, "A fall on a journey brings good luck." Something like when Julius Caesar landed in Africa, fell, and to prevent this from being seen as a bad omen by his soldiers, he said, "Africa, I have tight hold of you." So, Harald was recalling a proverb. Then the horsemen

approached and were still a certain distance away, but close enough to be able to see the faces of the Norwegians and the Norwegians the faces of the Saxons. And the chief of this small group calls out, "Is Earl Tostig here?" Tostig understands and says, "I do not deny that I am here." So then the Saxon horseman says, "I bear a message from your brother Harold, king of England. He offers you a third of his kingdom and his forgiveness"—for what he has done, of course, allying himself with the Norwegian foreigners and invading England. Then Tostig reflects for a moment. He would like to accept the offer, but at the same time, there stands the king of Norway and his army. And so he says, "If I accept his offer, what will my lord receive"—the other was the king of Norway and he was an earl—"my lord, Harald, king of Norway?" So, the horseman reflects for a moment and says, "Your brother has also thought of that. He offers him six feet of English ground, and," he adds, looking at him, "because he is so tall, one extra foot." During the [Second] World War, at the beginning, Churchill said in one of his speeches that so many centuries later, England had kept this offer open to all invaders, and he also offered Hitler six feet of English ground. The offer stood still.

So Tostig reflects for a moment and then says: "In this case, tell your lord that we will do battle, and that God will see who is victorious." The other says nothing and rides away. In the meantime, the king of Norway has understood everything, because the languages are similar, but he has not said a word. He has his suspicions. And when the other men have joined the bulk of the army, he asks Tostig—because in this dialogue, everybody comes off well—"Who was that knight who spoke so well?" You see? And then Tostig tells him: "That knight was my brother Harold, the king of England." And now we see why Harold asked at first, "Is Earl Tostig here?" Of course he knew he was, because he is seeing his brother. But he asks him in this manner to indicate to Tostig that he must not betray him. If the

Norwegians had known he was the king, they would have killed him immediately.

So the brother also acted loyally, because he pretended not to know him, and at the same time, he remained loyal to the king of Norway, because he asked, "What will there be for my lord?" And so the king of Norway, remembering their exchange, says, "He is not very tall, but he sits very steadfastly on his horse."

Then the Battle of Stamford Bridge begins—the site is still there—and the Saxons destroy the Norwegians, Tostig's allies, and the king of Norway conquers his six feet of English ground that he had been promised in the morning. Now, this victory is a little sad for Harold, because his brother was there. But it was a great victory, for the Norwegians were usually the ones who defeated the Saxons—but not here.

They are celebrating this victory when another horseman arrives, a very tired horseman, and he comes bearing news. He comes to tell Harold that the Normans have invaded in the south. So, the army, tired out from its victory, must now make a forced march to Hastings. And there in Hastings, the Normans are waiting. Now, the Normans were also Norsemen, but they had been in France for more than a century, they had forgotten the Danish language, they were really French. And it was their custom to shave their heads.

So Harold sends a spy—this was easy at that time—and sends him to the Norman camp. The spy returns and tells him he can rest assured, nothing is going to happen because the camp is a camp of friars. But those were the Normans. Then the next day, the battle is waged, and we have an episode that, if not historic—that is, historically significant—is historic in another way. Now another personage joins the action, another horseman. This is Taillefer, a minstrel; there are many horsemen in this story. He is a Norman minstrel, and he asks permission of William the Bastard, who will later become William the Conqueror, to

be the first to engage in battle. He asks him for this honor—a terrible honor, because naturally the first to engage in battle are the first to die. So he enters into combat playing with his sword, throwing it and picking it up in front of the astonished Saxons. The Saxons were a serious people, needless to say, I don't think there were many such fellows yet among them. And he enters the battle singing *cantilena Rollandi*, that is, singing an ancient version of *Chanson de Roland*. (So we are told in the ancient English chronicle by William of Malmesbury.)²⁴ And it is as if with him the entire French culture, all the light of France, entered England.

Now, the battle lasts the entire day. The Saxons and the Normans used different weapons. The Saxons had battle-axes—terrible weapons. The Normans cannot manage to break through the Saxon siege, so they resort to an ancient ruse of war: pretending to run away. The Saxons pursue them, and the Normans turn and destroy the Saxons. And there ends Saxon rule in England.

There is another episode that is also poetic—though poetic in a different manner—and it is the subject of a poem by Heine titled “*Schlachtfeld bei Hastings*,” “The Battlefield of Hastings.” *Schlacht*, naturally, is related to the English word “slay,” to kill, and the word “slaughter.” “Slaughterhouse” in England is a place where animals are killed. [The episode] is as follows: the Saxons are defeated by the Normans. Their defeat is natural because they had already been decimated during their victory over the Norwegians, because they were already very tired when they arrived, etcetera. And there is a problem, and this is to find the king's corpse. There are “merchants” who have followed the army, and naturally they steal the armor off the dead, the trappings off the horses, and the battlefield at Hastings is full of dead men and horses. So, there is a monastery nearby, and the monks naturally want to give Harold, the last Saxon king of England, a Christian burial. One of the monks, the abbot, remembers that the king had a mistress, who is not described but whom we can very easily imagine,

because her name is Edith Swaneshals, Edith Swanneck. Thus, she would be a very tall, blonde woman with a slender neck. She is one of many women the king had. He grew tired of her, abandoned her, and she lives in a hut in the middle of the forest. She has grown old, prematurely. (People aged very quickly then, just as they matured very quickly.) And so the abbot thinks that if anybody can recognize the king's corpse—or rather, the king's naked body, he must have thought—it would be this woman, who knew him so well, whom he abandoned. So they go to the hut, and out comes the woman, by then an old woman. The monks tell her that England has been conquered by the French, the Normans, that this has happened nearby, in Hastings, and they ask her to come look for the king's corpse. This is what the chronicle says. Now, Heine, naturally, uses this, describes the battlefield, describes the poor woman making her way through the stench of the dead and the birds of prey devouring them, and suddenly she recognizes the body of the man she loved. And she says nothing, but she covers him with kisses. So the monks identify the king, bury him, and give him a Christian burial.

Now, there also exists a legend that has been preserved in an Anglo-Saxon chronicle that says that King Harold did not die at Hastings but rather retired to a convent after the battle and there did penance for all his sins—it seems his life was tempestuous. And [the chronicle says] sometimes when William the Conqueror, who would thereafter rule over England, had a difficulty to resolve, he would pay a visit to this anonymous monk, who had once been Harold, king of England, and would ask him what he should do. And he always followed his advice, because naturally both of them—the conqueror and the conquered—cared about England's welfare. So, you may choose between these two versions, though I suspect you will prefer the first, the one about Edith Swanneck, who recognizes her old lover, and not the other one, about the king.

Then we have two centuries, and during these two centuries it is as if English literature were taking place underground, because French was spoken in court, the clergy spoke Latin, and the people spoke Saxon (four Saxon dialects that were also intermingled with Danish). And one must wait from the year 1066 to the fourteenth century for English literature—which had carried on in a crude, clumsy way, which had continued on like an underground river—to reemerge. And then we have the great names of Chaucer, Langland, and then we have a language, English, that has been deeply permeated by French, to such an extent that, yes, indeed, currently there are more Latin than Germanic words in the English dictionary. But the Germanic words are the essential ones, they are the words that correspond to fire, metals, man, trees. On the contrary, all the words of culture come from Latin.

And here we conclude the second unit.

CLASS 8

A BRIEF HISTORY UNTIL THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY. THE LIFE OF SAMUEL JOHNSON.

MONDAY, OCTOBER 31, 1966

Only a few days have passed since last Friday, but for our studies, it is as if many more had gone by. We are going to leave the eleventh century, take a leap, and land straight in the eighteenth century. But first, we should summarize the important events that have taken place in between.

After the Battle of Hastings, which marked the end of Saxon rule in England, the English language goes into crisis. From the fifth to the seventh century, English history is linked to Scandinavia, whether through the Danes—the Angles and the Jutes came from Denmark as well as from the mouth of the Rhine—or the Norwegians, with the Viking invasions. But after the Norman conquest in 1066, England is connected to France, separating from Scandinavian history and its influence. Literature is broken off, and the English language resurges two centuries later with Chaucer and Langland.

At first, the connection to France arises, we might say, in a bellicose fashion: in the Hundred Years' War, the English are soundly defeated. And in the fourteenth century, the first inklings of Protestantism appear in England, before anywhere else. At that time, what will become the British Empire begins to take shape: the war with Spain gives England a victory and predominance over the seas.

In the seventeenth century, there is a civil war, when Parliament rebels against the king. The Republic arises, which is an event that seriously scandalized the European nations at the time. The Republic did not last. Then came the era of the Restoration, culminating in the return of the monarchy, which continues till today.

The seventeenth century is the century of the metaphysical, baroque poets. This is when John Milton, the republican, writes his great poem, *Paradise Lost*. In the eighteenth century, on the other hand, the empire of Rationalism arises. It is the century of Reason, and the ideal of prose has changed. It is no longer the flamboyant prose of the seventeenth century, but rather one that aspires to clarity, eloquence, and expressions of logical justification. When dealing with abstract thought, words of Latin origin are used abundantly.

Now we come to the life of Samuel Johnson, a life that is very well known. It is a life we know better than that of any other man of letters. And we know it because of the work of his friend, James Boswell.

Samuel Johnson was born in the town of Lichfield, in Staffordshire County, an inland town in England, which is not, professionally speaking, his home. That is, it is not the home of his work. Johnson devoted his entire life to literature. He died in 1784, before the French Revolution, which he would have been against, for he was a man of conservative ideas, and was profoundly religious.

He spent his childhood in poverty. He was a sickly child and had tuberculosis. When he was still small, his parents took him to London for the Queen to touch him and thereby cure his disease. One of his first memories was of the Queen touching him and giving him a coin. His father was a bookseller, which for him was a great fortune. Along with his readings at home, he attended Lichfield Grammar School. "Lichfield" means "field of the dead."

Samuel Johnson was a wreck, physically, even though he was very strong. He was stout and ugly. He had nervous

tics. He went to London, where he lived in poverty. He attended Oxford University, but he never graduated or even came close: he was laughed out of the place. So he returns to Lichfield and founds a school. He marries an old woman, older than he, an ugly, old, ridiculous woman. But he was loyal to her. Perhaps, at that time, this might indicate how religious he was. Then she dies. He also had phobias. For example, he carefully avoided stepping on the cracks between the flagstones. He also avoided touching poles. Nevertheless, in spite of these eccentricities, he was one of the most sensible intellects of his era; he had a truly brilliant intellect.

After the death of his wife, he traveled to London and there published his translation of *A Voyage to Abyssinia*, by Father Lobo, a Jesuit.¹ He then wrote a novel about Abyssinia to pay for the cost of his mother's burial. He wrote that novel in one week. He published several journals, which appeared once or twice a week, for which he was the principal writer. Though it was illegal to publish accounts of the sessions of Parliament, he would often attend them, then publish his accounts, adding a little literary fantasy. In his reports, he would invent speeches, for example, and he always managed to show the conservatives in the best light.

During that period he wrote two poems: "London," and "The Vanity of Human Wishes." At that time, Pope was considered the greatest poet in England. Johnson's poetry, published anonymously, enjoyed a large circulation and was said to be better than Pope's. Pope then congratulated him, once his identity was known. "London" was a free translation of a satire by Juvenal.² This shows us how different the concept of translation was at that time compared to our concept today. At that time, the concept of a strict translation, where translation was considered a labor based on verbal fidelity, did not exist, as it does today. This concept of literal translation is based on translations of the Bible. Those were indeed undertaken with great respect. The

Bible, composed by an infinite intelligence, was a book man could not touch, or alter. The concept of literal translation, then, does not have any scientific origin, but is rather a sign of respect for the Bible. Groussac says that “the English of the Bible of the seventeenth century is as sacred a language as the Hebrew of the Old and New Testament.”³ Johnson used Juvenal as a model for “London,” and applied what Juvenal said about the unpleasant aspects of life for a poet in Rome to that of a poet in London. So, obviously, his translation had no intention of being literal.

Johnson made himself known through the journals he published, so much so that among writers, he was considered one of the most important. He was considered one of the best writers of his time, but the public didn’t know him, until he published his *Dictionary of the English Language*.⁴ Johnson believed that the English language had reached its peak and was in decline due to constant corruption by Gallicisms. Hence, it was the moment to fix it. In reference to this, Johnson said, “The English language is on the verge of losing its Teutonic character.”

According to Carlyle, Johnson’s style was “buckram.” This is true; his paragraphs are long and heavy. In spite of this, however, we can find sensible and original ideas on every page. Boileau wrote that tragedies that didn’t treat the site of the action as unique were absurd.⁵ Johnson reacted against that. Boileau said that it was impossible for the spectator to believe in “anyplace” and also in, say, Alexandria. He also criticized any lack of unity of time. From the point of view of common sense, the argument seems irrefutable, but Johnson contradicts him by saying that “the spectator who isn’t crazy knows perfectly well that he is not in Alexandria or anywhere else but rather in the theater, in the stalls watching a show.” This reply was aimed against the rule of three unities, which came from Aristotle, and which Boileau sustained.

So, a commission of booksellers went to visit Johnson and proposed that he write a dictionary that would include all the words in the language. This was something new and unusual. In the Middle Ages—in the tenth century, or in the ninth—when a scholar read a Latin text and found an anomalous word that he did not understand, he wrote his translation of it into the vernacular between the lines. Then scholars would meet and create glossaries; but at first they only included difficult Latin words. These glossaries were published separately. Then they started making dictionaries. The first were Italian and French. In England, the first dictionary was written by an Italian, and called *A Worlde of Wordes*.⁶ Next came an etymological dictionary, which attempted to include all words but did not deal with their meanings, instead giving the Latin or Saxon origins, or etymologies, of a word, or, rather, the Saxon or Teutonic origins. In Italy and France, academies wrote dictionaries that did not include all words. They did not want to include them all. They left out words that were rustic, dialectical, *argot*, or ones that were too technical, specific to each trade. They didn't want to be rich in words, but rather to have a few good words. They wanted precision above all, and to limit the language. In England, there were no academies or anything of the kind. Johnson himself, who published an English dictionary the main purpose of which was to fixate the language, did not believe the language *could* be definitively fixated. The language belongs to fishermen, not scholars. That is to say, language is created by humble folks, haphazardly, but its usage creates norms of correctness that should be sought in the best writers. In his search for these writers, Johnson established a time frame from Sir Philip Sidney to writers before the Restoration, a time that coincided, he believed, with the deterioration of the language through the introduction of Gallicisms, or words of French origin.

So, Johnson decided to write a dictionary. When the booksellers went to see him, they signed a contract. It stated

that the work would take three years to complete and that he would be paid 1,500 pounds sterling, which ended up being 1,600. He wanted the book to be an anthology, to include a passage from an English classic for each word. But he could not do everything he planned. He wanted to do so much, to include for each word several passages in order to show all its different nuances. But he was not satisfied with the two volumes he published. He went back and reread the classic authors, the English ones. In each work, he noted the passages in which a word was used well, and after noting it he would put the first letter next to it. In this way he marked up all the passages that he thought illustrated each word. He had six amanuenses, and five of them were Scottish. . . . Johnson knew very little Old English. The etymologies, added later, are the weakest aspect of his work, along with the definitions. Because of his ignorance of Old English, and his inability to do the etymologies, he defined lexicographer, jokingly, as “a writer of dictionaries, a harmless drudge.” And he called himself a lexicographer.

One day, one of his friends told him that the French Academy, with its forty members, had spent forty years creating a dictionary of the French language. And Johnson, who was a staunch nationalist, answered, “Forty Frenchmen to one Englishmen: the correct proportion.” And he made the same calculation with time: if the forty French people spent forty years, this meant a total of 1,600 years; that would be equivalent to the three years one Englishman would need. But the truth is that it took him nine rather than three years to complete his work, and the whole time the booksellers were depending on him to fulfill his commitment. That’s why they gave him an additional one hundred pounds.

This dictionary was considered good until the publication of Webster’s.⁷ We can now see that Webster, an American, had a much deeper knowledge than Johnson. (In our day, the *Oxford Dictionary* is the best; it is the historical dictionary of the language.) Johnson owed his fame to the

dictionary. He ended up being known as “Dictionary Johnson.” When Boswell first saw Johnson in a bookstore, they identified him by his nickname, “Dictionary,” which also was because of how he looked.

Johnson was poor for many years—for a time, he carried on a kind of epistolary duel with Lord Chesterfield that would later appear in his poem “London”: the garret and the jail, and after them, the patron.⁸ Around that time he publishes an edition of Shakespeare. Actually, this is one of his last works. His prologue is devoid of reverence, and he points out all the defects of Shakespeare’s work. Johnson also wrote a tragedy in which Mohammed makes an appearance, and a short novel, *Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia*, which has been compared to *Candide*, by Voltaire. During his final years, Johnson gives up literature and spends his time holding conversations in a tavern, where he emerges as the chief, or rather, dictator, of a literary salon that forms around him. Samuel Johnson, having abandoned his literary career, showed himself to be one of the great English spirits.

CLASS 9

RASSELAS, PRINCE OF ABYSSINIA, BY SAMUEL JOHNSON. THE LEGEND OF THE BUDDHA. OPTIMISM AND PESSIMISM. LEIBNIZ AND VOLTAIRE.

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 2, 1966

Today we will discuss the story of *Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia*. This is not the most characteristic of Johnson's works. His letter to Lord Chesterfield is much more characteristic, as are several articles in *The Rambler*, or the preface to the *Dictionary*, or the preface to his critical edition of Shakespeare.¹ But [*Rasselas*] is the most readily accessible work for you, for there is a version by Mariano de Vedia y Mitre, and anyway it is a very easy read: it can be read in one afternoon.² It is said that Johnson wrote it to pay for his mother's burial, after he wrote the dictionary, when he was already the most famous man of letters in England (but he was not a rich man). Let's begin with the title: *Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia*. And let us remember a significant fact: that one of the first—or *the* first—publications of Samuel Johnson was a translation of *A Voyage to Abyssinia* by the Portuguese Jesuit, Lobo, which Johnson did not do directly but instead worked from a French version.³ The important thing for us now is the fact that Johnson knew specific information about Abyssinia, for he had translated a book about that country. However, in his short novel, or long short story, *Rasselas*, he at no point uses his knowledge of Abyssinia. Now, we shouldn't think this

was an oversight by Johnson, or that he forgot. That would be completely absurd in the case of a man like him. We should think about his concept of literature—so different from our contemporary concept—and we should stop there. There is, anyway, one chapter of *Rasselas* in which one of the characters, the poet Imlac, explains his concept of poetry. And, apparently, since Johnson—who was many things—was never an inventor of character, Imlac expresses in this chapter—titled “A Dissertation Upon Poetry”—Johnson’s concept of poetry, of literature in general, we could say. Prince Rasselas asks the wise poet Imlac what poetry is, what is its nature, and Imlac tells him that the role of the poet is not to count the stripes on a tulip or linger over the many shades of green of the foliage. The poet should not deal with the individual but rather with the generic, for the poet is writing for posterity. He says that the poet must not concern himself with what is local, with what belongs to one class, one region, one nation. For since poetry has that lofty mission to be eternal, the poet should worry not about problems—Johnson did not use the word “problem,” for at that time that word was used specifically for mathematics—not about the concerns of his era, but rather should seek out the eternal, the eternal passions of man, as well as subjects such as the brevity of human life, the vicissitudes of destiny, the hopes we have for immortality, sins, virtues, etcetera.

In other words, Johnson had a concept of literature that was very different from the contemporary one, from ours. Now people instinctively feel that each poet belongs to his nation, to his class, to his time. But Johnson aimed for something higher. Johnson thought that a poet should write for all the men of his century. This is why with *Rasselas*, besides there being a geographic reference—it mentions the father of waters, the source of the Nile, and there’s one or another geographic reference to the weather—and that everything takes place in Abyssinia, it could take place in any other country. Johnson didn’t do this, I repeat, out of

negligence or ignorance but because it corresponds to his concept of literature. We must not forget, moreover, that *Rasselas* was written more than two hundred years ago, and in the interval, literary conventions have changed greatly. For example, there is one literary convention that Johnson accepts and that now seems awkward to us: the monologue. His characters abundantly indulge in soliloquies. Johnson did not do this because he thought that people were given to monologue, but because it was a convenient way of expressing what he felt and, at the same time, expressing his own eloquence, which was great. Let us remember the analogous example of the speeches in Tacitus's historical works. In that case, naturally, Tacitus did not suppose those barbarians would have addressed their tribes with such speeches, but the speeches were a way to express what those people may have felt. Tacitus's contemporaries did not accept his speeches as historical documents, but rather as rhetorical pieces that helped them understand what Tacitus was describing.

The style of *Rasselas*, at the beginning, runs the risk of seeming a bit infantile and overly adorned. But Johnson believed in the dignity of literature. It will seem slow, the style faltering. But after eight or ten pages, that slowness feels pleasant to us—or to me, in any case, and to many other readers. There is a tranquility in reading it, we have to get used to it. And then Johnson opens the work up by using a fable. Through the fable—which is quite tenuous, of course—we feel melancholy, gravity, sincerity, integrity, all of which are fundamental in Johnson.

Now, the fable in *Rasselas* is as follows: the author imagines that the Abyssinian emperors had isolated a valley from the rest of the kingdom, a valley called “Happy Valley,” which was near the source of the Nile—the father of waters, as he calls it—and surrounded by high mountains. The only access to the world from this valley was through a bronze gate, which was constantly under guard, very strong, and quite massive. It was really impossible to open. Then he says

that everything that can make men sad has been excluded from this valley. There are meadows and forests surrounding the valley, and it is fertile; there is a lake, and the prince's palace is on an island in the middle of the lake. And there live the princes until the emperor dies, then it is the oldest prince's turn to become the emperor of Abyssinia. In the meantime, the prince and his people devote their lives to pleasure—not only, of course, physical pleasures, of which little is mentioned in the text (Johnson was an author who respected his readers; if we remember from Boileau, “The French reader / must be respected,” and this was applied to all readers at the time), but also intellectual pleasures, the pleasure of the sciences and the arts. Now, this idea of a prince condemned to a happy imprisonment has resonance—Johnson himself was probably ignorant of it—in the legend of Buddha, though it would have reached him through the story of Barlaam and Josaphat, adopted as the subject of one of Lope de Vega's comedies: the idea of a prince who has been brought up surrounded with artificial happiness.⁴ The legend of Buddha, we might remember, can be summarized as follows: there was a king in India about five centuries before Christ—a contemporary of Heraclitus, of Pythagoras—who has it revealed to him, through the dream of a woman who is giving birth to his son, that his son can become the emperor of the world, or he can become the Buddha, the man destined to save men from the endless cycle of reincarnation. The father, naturally, would rather he be emperor of the world than the savior of mankind. He knows that if the son finds out about the miseries of mankind, he will refuse to be king and will become the Buddha, the savior—the word “Buddha” means “awake.” So he decides that the boy will live in seclusion in a palace, never learning anything about the miseries of mankind. The prince is a great athlete, an archer and horseman. He has a large harem, and he reaches the age of twenty-nine. On his birthday, he goes out in a carriage and rides to one of the gates of the palace that faces north. And there he sees

something he has never seen before: a strange person whose face is furrowed with wrinkles, who's bent over, leaning on a cane, walking with hesitant step, and his hair is white. The prince asks about this strange person, who seems barely human, and the driver of the carriage says he is an old man, and that with the passage of time, he will be that old man, and that all men will be or have been old. Then he returns to his palace, very disturbed by what he has seen, and after a while he goes on another outing, along a different road, and he comes across a recumbent man, very pale, emaciated, perhaps his whiteness is from leprosy. He asks who he is, and they tell him that he is a sick man, and that with time he will be this sick man, that all men will be. Then, on his third outing he goes south, let's say, and something even stranger occurs. He sees several men carrying another man who seems to be sleeping, but he isn't breathing. He asks who he is, and they tell him he is a dead man. It is the first time he has heard the word "dead." Then he goes out a fourth time and sees an old, but robust, man wearing a yellow robe, and he asks who he is. They tell him he is a hermit, a yogi (the word "yoga" has the same root as "yoke," which means "discipline"), and that man is beyond all the world's adversity. Then Prince Siddhartha flees from the palace and decides to seek salvation; he becomes the Buddha and teaches salvation to mankind. And, according to one version of this legend—please forgive me this digression, but the story is beautiful—the prince, the driver, and the four characters he sees—the old man, the sick man, the dead man, and the hermit—are all the same person. That is, he has taken on different forms to fulfill the destiny of the Bodhisattva, the pre-Buddha. (There is an echo of this word in the name Josaphat.) Now some echo of this legend must have reached Johnson, because the prince in that legend is the same: we have a prince in reclusive captivity in Happy Valley. And this prince reaches the age of twenty-six—which could be an echo of twenty-nine in the Buddha legend—and he feels the dissatisfaction of having all his desires gratified.

As soon as he wants something, he has it. This leads him into a state of despair. He leaves the palace filled with musicians and pleasures . . . he leaves the palace and goes out to walk alone. Then he sees the animals, the gazelles, the crows. Farther up, along the slopes of the mountains, are the camels, the elephants. And he thinks that those animals are happy because all they have to do is wish for something and once their needs are met, they doze off. But in man there is some kind of infinite longing: once everything he can desire is satisfied, he will desire other things, and he doesn't even know what they are. Then he meets an inventor. This inventor has invented a flying machine. He suggests to the prince that he might want to board it and escape from Happy Valley and learn firsthand about the suffering of humanity. Then there's a somewhat funny passage that Alfonso Reyes quotes in his book *Rilindero*.⁵ It is as if it were a foreshadowing of the science fiction of our day, the work of Wells or Bradbury: the inventor takes off from a tower in his rudimentary machine, crashes, breaks a leg, and then the prince realizes that he has to find some other way of escaping from the valley. Then he talks to Imlac, the poet whose concept of poetry we have already discussed; he talks to his sister, who is as weary of happiness as he is—of the immediate gratification of every desire—and they decide to escape from the valley. And here the novel suddenly turns into a psychological story. Because Johnson tells us that for a year the prince was so happy at having made the decision to escape, that this decision itself was enough for him, and he did nothing to carry through with it. Every morning he thinks, "I'm going to escape from the valley," then spend his time enjoying the banquets, the music, the pleasure of the senses and the intellect, and this is how he spent two years. One morning, he understood that he had been living on hope. So he went out to explore the mountains, to see if he could find anything, and finally he found a cave through which the water from the rivers emptied into a lake. And, accompanied by Imlac, he

explored it, and he saw that there was a spot, a kind of grotto, through which he could escape. Three years after making his decision, he, his sister, Imlac, and a woman from his court named Pekuah decide to leave Happy Valley. They knew that all they had to do was climb over the mountains to be free; nobody else knew about the path through the rocks. So they choose one night to escape, and after a few setbacks—not many, because Johnson was not writing an adventure novel, but rather rewriting his poem about the vanity of human hope—they find themselves to the north, on the other side of the mountains. Then they see a group of shepherds, and at first—this is a very human, very realistic fiction—the prince and princess are amazed that the shepherds do not fall to their knees in front of them. Even though they want to mingle with common people, even though they want to be like other men, they are naturally accustomed to the ceremony of the court. So they turn north, where everything surprises them, even people's indifference toward them. They are secretly carrying jewels—because the treasures of the kings of Abyssinia are in the palace. There are also hollow columns in the palace full of jewels. There are also spies who watch the prince and princess, but they managed to escape. Then they reach a port on the Red Sea. They are amazed by the port and the ships. Months pass before they embark. The princess is terrified at first. But her brother and Imlac tell her she must carry through with her decision, and they set sail. Here one hopes the author will throw in a storm, just to entertain the reader. But Johnson is not thinking about such things. The fact that Johnson wrote this book in such a slow, musical style is quite remarkable, this book in which all the sentences are perfectly balanced. There is not a single sentence that ends abruptly, and we find a monotonous, but very agile, music, and this is what Johnson wrote while he was thinking about the death of his mother, whom he loved so much.

Finally they reach Cairo. The reader understands that Cairo is a kind of metaphor, a reflection of London. The commercial activities in the city are described; the prince and princess feel lost in these crowds of people, who jostle them and push them aside. And Imlac sells some of the jewels they have brought; he buys a palace, and establishes himself there as a merchant, and meets the most important people in Egypt, that is, in England, because Johnson took all those trappings of the Orient from *The Arabian Nights* (which was translated at the beginning of the eighteenth century by the French Orientalist Galland).⁶ There is very little Oriental color; that didn't interest Johnson. Then he talks about the nations of Europe. Imlac says that compared to the nations of Europe, these people are barbarians. That the nations of Europe have ways of communicating among themselves. He talks about the letters that arrive quickly, the bridges, he talks again about the many ships. (They already sailed in one from Abyssinia to Cairo.) And the prince asks him if the Europeans are happier. Imlac answers that wisdom and science are preferable to ignorance, that barbarism and ignorance cannot be sources of happiness, that the Europeans are surely wiser than the Abyssinians; but he cannot assert, based on his interactions with the Europeans, that they are happier. Then we listen to several conversations between philosophers. One of them says that man can be happy if he lives according to the laws of nature, but he cannot explain what those laws are, and the prince understands that the more he converses with him, the less he will understand about the laws of nature. He politely says goodbye, then receives news of a hermit, a man who has been living in solitude in Thebaide for fourteen years.⁷ He decides to visit him. After a few days—I think he travels by camel—he reaches the hermit's cave, which has been divided into several rooms. The hermit offers him meat and wine. He himself is a frugal man and eats only vegetables and milk. The prince asks him to tell him his story, and the

other says that he used to be a soldier, that he has known the tumult of battle, the shame of defeat, the joy of victory, that he became renowned and that he saw that because of a court intrigue, a less capable, less brave officer was given a higher position. So he sought reclusion, and for many years he has lived alone, dedicated to meditation. And the prince—this story is a parable, a fable about a man who seeks happiness—asks him if he is happy. The philosopher answers that solitude has not allowed him to let go of the images of the city, its sins and its pleasures. That before, when he had all those pleasures within reach, he could gratify himself and then think about other things. But now, living in solitude, the only thing he does is think about the city and the pleasures he has renounced. He tells them that it is fortunate that they arrived that night, because he had made up his mind to return the following day to Cairo. And he abandons his solitude. The prince tells him that he thinks he is wrong. The other tells him that naturally, for him solitude is a novelty, but now that he has been alone for fourteen or fifteen years, he is sick of it; so they say goodbye, and the prince goes to visit a great pyramid. Johnson says that the pyramids are the greatest works of mankind. The pyramids and the Great Wall of China. He says that there is an explanation for the wall: on one side we have a fearful, peaceful, very civilized people, and on the other, hordes of barbarian horsemen who could be stopped by a wall. It is understandable why the wall was built. As for the pyramids, we know they are tombs, but such an enormous structure is not needed to preserve that man.

Then the prince, the princess, Imlac, and Pekuah reach the entrance to the pyramid. The princess is terrified—fear is her only feeling portrayed in the novel—and she says she doesn't want to enter, that inside there might be the specters of the dead. Imlac tells her there is no reason whatsoever to think that specters would like cadavers, and that he has already been there. He asks her to enter. He, in any case, goes in first. The princess agrees to follow. Then

they reach a large chamber, and there they talk about the founder of the pyramids. And they say: "Here we have a man with unlimited power over an enormous empire, a man who clearly had at his fingertips the satisfaction of all his desires. And even so, where did that get him? To boredom. To the useless task of forcing thousands of men to pile one stone upon another until they had built a useless pyramid." Here we might recall Sir Thomas Browne, a good writer from the seventeenth century, author of the phrase you know, "the ghost of a rose."⁸ (That phrase, I think, was invented by Sir Thomas Browne.) And wise Imlac, when talking about the pyramids, asks, "Who wouldn't take pity on the builders of the pyramids?" Then the prince says, "Who believes that power, luxury, and omnipotence can make a man happy? I will tell that man to look at these pyramids and admit his folly."⁹

Then they visit a monastery, and in the monastery they converse with the monks, and the monks tell them that they are accustomed to a harsh life, that they know that their lives will be harsh, but they have no certainty that it will be happy. They also speak about love, about the vicissitudes of the anxious and uncertain happiness created by love. And having known the world and seen men and their cities, the Prince, Imlac, the Princess, and Pekuah (the princess's maid) decide to return to Happy Valley, where they won't be happy, but they will be no more miserable than outside the valley.

In other words, the whole story of *Rasselas* is really a rejection of man's happiness and has been compared to Voltaire's *Candide*. Now, if we compare Voltaire's *Candide* and Johnson's *Rasselas* line by line, page by page, we will immediately see that *Candide* is a much more brilliant book than *Rasselas*, but that Voltaire's brilliance itself refutes his own thesis. Leibniz, a contemporary of Voltaire, put forth the theory that we live in the best of all possible worlds, and this was derisively called "optimism."¹⁰ The word "optimism"

that we now use to mean “good humor” was a word invented to be used against Leibniz. He believed that we live in the best of all possible worlds, and he has a parable in which he imagines a pyramid. That pyramid has an apex, but it does not have a base. Each of the floors of the pyramid corresponds to a world, the world of each floor is better than the one below it, and so on, infinitely—the pyramid has no base so it is strictly infinite. And then Leibniz has his hero live an entire life in each of the pyramid’s floors. At the end, after infinite reincarnations, he reaches the apex. And when he reaches the last floor, he has a feeling that is akin to happiness, he thinks he has reached heaven, and then he asks, “Where am I now?” Then they explain that this is Earth. That is, we are in the happiest of all possible worlds. Now, of course, this world is full of misfortune; I think having a toothache is enough to convince us that we don’t live in paradise. But Leibniz explains this by saying it is equivalent to the dark colors in a painting. He invents an illustration of this that is as brilliant as it is false. He tells us to imagine a library with one thousand volumes. Each one of these volumes is the *Aeneid*—or the *Iliad*, if you prefer. (It was believed that the *Aeneid*—or the *Iliad*—was the highest in all of literature.) Now, which would you prefer, a library with one thousand volumes of the *Aeneid*—or the *Iliad*, or any other book that you like a lot, because for this example it doesn’t matter which? Or would you prefer a library with just one copy of the *Aeneid* and works by greatly inferior writers, such as any of our contemporaries? The reader will obviously answer that he would prefer a library with a variety of books. And so Leibniz answers, “Okay, that other library is the world.” In the world we have perfect beings and moments of happiness, as perfect as Virgil. But we have others as bad as the works of Mr. So-and-so, no need to give any names here.

But this example is false, because a reader can choose from among books, and if it is our lot to choose that horrible work by Mr. What’s-his-name, then who knows if we can be happy. Kierkegaard has a similar example. He says that we

can imagine a delicious dish. All the ingredients in that dish are delicious, but for the ingredients in that dish, it's necessary to add a drop of a bitter aloe, for example. And then he says, "Each of us is one of the ingredients in that dish, but if it is my lot to be the drop of bitter aloe, am I going to be as happy as the one who is a drop of honey?" And Kierkegaard, who had deep religious sentiments, says, "From the depth of Hell, I will be grateful to God for being the drop of bitter aloe that is necessary for the variety and conception of the universe." Voltaire didn't think like that; he thought that there is much evil in this world, more evil than good, and so he wrote *Candide* to demonstrate pessimism. One of the first examples he chooses is the earthquake of Lisbon, and he says that God allowed the earthquake of Lisbon to punish the inhabitants for their many sins. Voltaire wonders if the inhabitants of Lisbon are really more sinful than the inhabitants of London or Paris, who have not been judged deserving of an earthquake by divine justice. Now, what could be said against *Candide* and in favor of *Rasselas* is that a world in which *Candide*—which is a delicious work, full of jokes—exists can't be such a terrible world. Because surely, when Voltaire wrote *Candide*, he didn't feel the world was so terrible. He was expounding a thesis and was having a lot of fun doing so. On the contrary, in Johnson's *Rasselas*, we feel Johnson's melancholy. We feel that for him life is essentially horrible. And the very scantiness of invention in *Rasselas* makes it that much more convincing.

In the book we will discuss next time, we will see Johnson's profound melancholy. We know he felt life as horrible, in a way Voltaire could not have. It is also true that Johnson must have derived a considerable amount of pleasure from the practice of literature, from the ease with which he wrote long, musical sentences, sentences that are never empty, that always mean something. But we know he was a melancholic man. Johnson also lived tormented by his fear of going crazy; he was very conscious of his phobias. . . .

I think I mentioned last time that he would commonly attend meetings and recite Our Father out loud. Johnson was much admired in society, but he deliberately retained his country manners. For example, he was at a grand dinner party; and on one side sat a duchess, on the other an academic, and when he ate—above all if the food was a little spoiled, he liked food that was a little spoiled—the veins on his forehead would swell. The duchess said something polite to him, and he answered by brushing her off with his hand and making some kind of grunt. He was a man who, though accepted by society, scorned it. And in his literary work, as in that of Swinburne, there are many prayers. One of the forms of composition he used a lot was prayers, in which he asked God forgiveness for how little he had tolerated, for all the foolish and crazy things he had done in his life. . . . But all of this, this examination of Johnson's character, we will leave for another class, because Johnson's private life is revealed, not by him—he tried to hide it and never complained about it—but by an extraordinary character, James Boswell, who devoted himself to visiting Johnson and writing down on a daily basis all of his conversations; and in this way he left behind the best biography in all of literature, according to Macaulay.¹¹ So, we will devote our next class to Boswell's work and to examining Boswell's character, which has been widely discussed, criticized by some and praised by others.

CLASS 10

SAMUEL JOHNSON AS SEEN BY BOSWELL. THE ART OF BIOGRAPHY. BOSWELL AND HIS CRITICS.
MONDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 1966

Dr. Johnson was already fifty years old. He had published his dictionary, for which he was paid 1,500 pounds sterling—which became 1,600 when his publishers decided to give him one hundred more—when he finished. He was slowing down. He then published his edition of Shakespeare, which he finished only because his publishers had received payments from subscribers, so it had to be done. Otherwise, Dr. Johnson spent his time engaged in conversation.

It was around this time that Oxford University, from which he had not been able to graduate, decided to make him a doctor, *honoris causa*. He founded a club, over which he presided like a dictator, according to the biography by James Boswell, and after the publication of his dictionary he found he was famous, well-known, but not rich. For a while, he spent his life in poverty but “with pride of literature.” According to Boswell’s account, he appears to have overdone it. In fact, he had a certain tendency toward idleness; for a time after the dictionary was published, he did almost nothing at all, though he was probably working on the Shakespeare edition, as I mentioned. The truth is, in spite of his numerous accomplishments, he had a natural tendency toward idleness. He preferred to talk rather than write. So, he worked only on that edition of Shakespeare, which was one of his last works, for he received complaints, and satirical responses, and this made him decide to finish the work, because the subscribers had already paid.

Johnson had a peculiar temperament. For a time he was extremely interested in the subject of ghosts. He was so interested in them that he spent several nights in an abandoned house to see if he could meet one. Apparently, he didn't. There's a famous passage by the Scottish writer, Thomas Carlyle, I think it is in his *Sartor Resartus*—which means “The Tailor Retailored,” or “The Mended Tailor,” and we'll soon see why—in which he talks about Johnson, saying that Johnson wanted to see a ghost.¹ And Carlyle wonders: “What is a ghost? A ghost is a spirit that has taken corporal form and appears for a while among men.” Then Carlyle adds, “How could Johnson not have thought of this when faced with the spectacle of the human multitudes he loved so much in the streets of London, for if a ghost were a spirit that has taken a corporal form for a brief interval, why did it not occur to him that the London multitudes were ghosts, that he himself was a ghost? What is each man but a spirit that has taken corporal form briefly and then disappears? What are men if not ghosts?”

It was around this time that the Tory, conservative, government—not the Whig, liberal—decided to recognize Johnson's importance and grant him a pension. And the Earl of Bute was commissioned to discuss the issue with Johnson.² This was because the government did not want to offer it to him directly because of his reputation and the many statements he had made against pensions and other things of that nature. In fact, his definition of a pension, which appears in his dictionary, is famous; it says a pension is an allowance received by a state mercenary, generally for having betrayed his country. And as Johnson was a very violent man, they didn't want to grant him a pension before having consulted with him. There was a legend, or story, that Johnson had an argument with a bookseller and felled him with a blow, not with a cane but with a book, a folio volume, which makes the anecdote more literary and also testifies to Johnson's great physical strength, for such

manuscripts are difficult to handle, especially in the middle of a fight.

Johnson agreed, let us say, to an interview with the prime minister, who then, with great tact, sounded him out on the subject and assured him that he would be granted a pension, of three hundred pounds sterling a year, a considerable sum at the time: not for what he would do—which meant that the state would not be buying Johnson—but rather for what he had *already* done. Johnson was grateful for the honor and more or less made it understood that they could grant him the pension without danger of provoking a hostile reaction from him. I don't know if I mentioned or not that centuries later, Kipling was offered the position of poet laureate, and Kipling did not want it, even though he was a personal friend to the king. He said that if he accepted that honor, his freedom to criticize the government when it behaved badly would be curtailed. Moreover, Kipling surely thought that being named poet laureate would add nothing to his literary fame. Johnson accepted the pension, which caused many to satirize him. Nobody failed to remember his definition of a pension, and later in a bookstore something took place that was undoubtedly of little importance to him at the moment. Generally, the important events in our lives seem trivial when they take place and only later take on importance.

Johnson was in a bookstore when he met a young man named James Boswell. This young man was born in Edinburgh in 1740 and died in the year 1795. He was the son of a judge. In Scotland, judges were given the title of Lord and could choose the place they wanted to be lord of. Boswell's father had a small castle that was in ruins. Scotland is full of castles in ruins, poor castles in the Highlands of Scotland, and as opposed to the castles of the Rhine, which suggest an opulent life with small but more or less lavish courts, these don't, they give the impression of a life of battle, of difficult battles against the English. The castle was called Auchinleck. Boswell's father, then, was

Lord Auchinleck and so was his son. But this wasn't, let us say, a native title, from birth, but rather a judicial title. Now, even though Boswell showed an interest in letters, his parents wanted him to go into law. He studied in Edinburgh and then for more than two years at Utrecht University in Holland. This was customary at that time: to study at several universities, in the British Isles and on the continent. It could be said that Boswell had a premonition of his destiny. Like Milton knew that he would be a poet before he had written a single line, Boswell always felt he would be the biographer of a great man of his era. So he visited Voltaire; he tried to approach the great men of his time. He visited Voltaire in Berne, in Switzerland, and he made friends with Jean-Jacques Rousseau—they were friends for only fifteen or twenty days, because Rousseau was a very ill-tempered man—and then he became friends with an Italian general, Paoli, from Corsica.³ And when he returned to England, he wrote a book about Corsica, and at a party given in Stratford-upon-Avon to celebrate the birth of Shakespeare, he showed up dressed as a Corsican villager. So that people would recognize him as the author of the book about Corsica, he carried a sign on his hat, on which he had written "Corsica's Boswell," and we know this because of his own testimony and that of his contemporaries.

Johnson felt a special antagonism toward the Scots, so young Boswell introducing himself as a Scot did not work in his favor. I don't remember right now the name of the owner of the bookstore, but I know that a friend of Johnson's said he could not imagine anything more humiliating for the man than the fact that the bookstore owner patted him on the shoulder.^{4a>} Of course, this didn't happen at their first meeting; Johnson would not have allowed it. And Johnson spoke badly of Scotland, and then he complained about Boswell's friend Garrick, the famous actor David Garrick; and he said that Garrick had refused to give tickets to a lady friend of his. He was acting in a Shakespeare play, I don't

know which one. And then Boswell said, "I can't believe Garrick would have acted in such a mean fashion." Now, Johnson spoke badly of Garrick, but he would not allow others to do so. It was a privilege that he reserved for himself in light of the close friendship between them. So he said [to Boswell]: "Sir, I have known Garrick since childhood, and I will not allow any slight to be made against him." And Boswell had to ask to be forgiven. Then Johnson left, without knowing that something very important had happened, something that would determine his fame more than his dictionary, more than *Rasselas*, more than the tragedy *Irene*, more than his translation of Juvenal, more than all his journals. Boswell complained a little about how harshly Johnson had treated him, but the bookseller reassured him that Johnson had a brusque manner, and that he believed Boswell could attempt a second meeting with Johnson. Naturally, there were no telephones then, and visits were announced. But Boswell let three or four days pass before he presented himself at Johnson's house, and Johnson gave him a warm welcome.

There is something very strange about Boswell, something that has been interpreted in two different ways. I'm going to look at the two extreme views: the one of the English essayist and historian Macaulay, who wrote around the middle of the nineteenth century, and that of Bernard Shaw, written, I believe, around 1915, or something like that.⁵ Then there is a whole range of judgments between those two. Macaulay says that the preeminence of Homer as an epic poet, of Shakespeare as a dramatic poet, of Demosthenes as an orator, and of Cervantes as a novelist is no less indisputable than the preeminence of Boswell as a biographer. And then he says that all those eminent names owed their preeminence to their talent and brilliance, and that the odd thing about Boswell is that he owes *his* preeminence as a biographer to his foolishness, his inconsistency, his vanity, and his imbecility. He then recounts a series of instances in which Boswell appears as a

ridiculous character. He says that if these things that happened to Boswell had happened to anybody else, that person would have wanted the earth to swallow him up. Boswell, however, dedicated himself to publicizing them.⁶ For example, there's the scorn shown to him by an English duchess, and the fact that members of the club he managed to join thought there could not be a person less intelligent than Boswell. But Macaulay forgets that we owe the narration of almost all those facts to Boswell himself. Moreover, I believe a priori that a person with the lights out upstairs can write a good poem. I have known poets "whose name I do not wish to recall," who were extremely vulgar, and even trivial, apart from their poetry, but they were well enough informed to know that a poet should exhibit delicate sentiments, should express noble melancholy, should limit himself to certain vocabulary.⁷ And so these people were, outside their work . . . some were broken men, but to tell the truth, when they wrote, they did so with decorum because they had learned the trade. Now, I think this is possible in the case of a short composition—a fool can utter a brilliant sentence—but it seems quite rare for a fool to be able to write an admirable biography of seven or eight hundred pages in spite of being a fool or, according to Macaulay, *because* he was a fool.

Now, let us take a look at the opposite opinion, that of Bernard Shaw. Bernard Shaw, in one of his long and incisive prologues, says that he is the heir to an apostolic succession of dramatists, that this succession comes from the Greek tragedians—from Aeschylus, Sophocles, through Euripides—and then passes through Shakespeare, through Marlowe. He says that he is not, in fact, better than Shakespeare, that if he had lived in Shakespeare's century he would not have written works better than *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*; but now he can, for he cannot stand Shakespeare, because he has read authors who are better than him. Before, he mentioned other dramatists, names that are somewhat surprising for such a

list. He says we have the four Evangelists, those four great dramatists who created the character Christ. Before, we had Plato, who created the character Socrates. Then we have Boswell, who created the character Johnson. "And now, we have me, who has created so many characters it is not worth listing them, the list would be almost infinite as well as being well known." "Finally," he says, "I am heir to the apostolic succession that begins with Aeschylus and ends in me and that undoubtedly will continue." So here we have these two extreme opinions: one, that Boswell was an idiot who had the good fortune to meet Johnson and write his biography—that's Macaulay's—and the other, the opposite, of Bernard Shaw, who says that Johnson was, among his other literary merits, a dramatic character created by Boswell.

It would be unusual for the truth to be exactly in the middle between these two extremes. Lugones, in his prologue to *El imperio jesuítico* [The Jesuit Empire], says that people often claim that the truth can be found between two extreme statements, but that it would be very strange in any particular case for there to be, for instance, 50 percent in favor and 50 percent against.⁸ The most natural would be for there to be 52 percent against and 48 percent in favor, or something like that. And this can be applied to any war and any argument. In other words, one side will always be a little more right and one a little more wrong.

So, now we will return to the relationship between Boswell and Johnson. Johnson was a famous man, a dictator in the world of English letters (at the same time he was a man who suffered from loneliness, as do many famous men). Boswell was a young man, in his twenties. Johnson was from a humble background; his father was a bookseller in a small town in Staffordshire. And the other was a young aristocrat. In other words, it is well known that men of a certain age are rejuvenated by the company of the young. Johnson was, moreover, an extremely unkempt person: he paid no attention to what he wore; he had a gluttonous appetite.

When he ate, the veins on his forehead swelled, he emitted all kinds of grunts, and he didn't respond if somebody asked him a question; he pushed away—like so, with his hands—a woman who asked him something, and grunted at the same time, or he'd start praying right in the middle of a meeting.⁹ But he knew that everything would be tolerated because he was an important figure. In spite of all this, Boswell became friends with him. Boswell did not contradict him; he listened to his opinions with reverence. It *is* true that at times Boswell annoyed him with questions that were difficult to answer. He asked him, for example—just to know what Dr. Johnson would answer—“What would you do if you were locked in a tower with a newborn baby?” Of course, Johnson answered, “I have no intention of answering such an inept question.” And Boswell jotted down this answer, went to his house, and wrote it up. But after two or three months of friendship, Boswell decided to go to Holland to continue his legal studies, and Johnson, who was very attached to London . . . Johnson said, “When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life.” Johnson accompanied Boswell to the boat. I think it is many miles south of London. That is, he diligently tolerated the long and—at the time—difficult trip, and Boswell says he stood at the port watching the boat sail away, waving goodbye. They wouldn't see each other for two or three years. Then, after his failure with Voltaire, his failure with Rousseau, his success with Paoli—which might not have been difficult because Paoli was not a very important person—Boswell decided to dedicate himself to being Johnson's biographer.

Johnson dedicated his final years—I think we have already talked about this—to conversation. But first he wrote and published some *Lives*, of the English poets. Among these is one that is easy to find and I recommend it to you: the “Life of Milton.” It is written without any reverence for Milton. Milton was a republican; he had already participated in campaigns against the royalty. Johnson, on the other hand, was a fervent defender of the monarchy and a loyal

subject of the English king. Now, in these *Lives*, there are some very interesting elements. Moreover, we can find details that were quite unusual for that time. For example, Johnson wrote the life of the famous poet Alexander Pope, who had real manuscripts, not like Valéry.¹⁰ What I've been told about Valéry is that during his final years he was not a wealthy man, and he devoted his time to creating false manuscripts. That is, he wrote a poem, used any old adjective, then crossed it out and put in the real one. The adjective that he first wrote, he had invented in order to correct it. Or, he would sell manuscripts in which he changed a few words and then didn't correct them so they would look like drafts. On the other hand, Johnson had, as I said, real manuscripts of Pope's, with his corrections. And it is curious to see how Pope sometimes begins to use a poetic epithet. He writes, for example, "the silvery light of the moon," and then he says, "the shepherds blessed the silvery light of the moon." And then, instead of "silvery," he uses a deliberately prosaic epithet: "the useful light."¹¹ Johnson relates all this in his biographies, and some of them are so good they should be used as examples. But Boswell thought differently. These biographies of Johnson's were pretty short. Boswell conceived of the idea of an extensive biography, one that included his conversations with Johnson, whom he saw several times a week, sometimes more. *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, by Boswell, has often been compared to *Conversations of Goethe*, by Eckermann, a book that in my opinion is in no way comparable, even though it was praised by Nietzsche as the best book ever written in German.¹² Because Eckermann was a man of limited intelligence who greatly revered Goethe, who spoke with him ex cathedra. Eckermann very rarely dared to contradict Goethe. Then he'd go home and write it all down. The book has something of catechism about it. In other words: Eckermann asks, Goethe answers, the first writes down what Goethe has said. But this book—which is very interesting, for Goethe was

interested in many things, we could say he was interested in the universe—this book is not a drama; Eckermann almost doesn't exist except as a kind of machine that records Goethe's words. We know nothing about Eckermann, nothing about his character—he undoubtedly had one, but this cannot be deduced from the book, cannot be inferred from it. On the other hand, what Boswell planned, or in any case what he carried out, was completely different: to make Johnson's biography a drama, with several characters. There is [Sir Joshua] Reynolds, there is [Oliver] Goldsmith, sometimes the members of the circle, or how would we call it, the salon, of which Johnson was the leader.¹³ And they appear and behave like the characters in a play. Indeed, each has his own personality—above all, Dr. Johnson, who is presented sometimes as ridiculous but always as lovable. This is what happens with Cervantes's character, Don Quixote, a character who is sometimes ridiculous but always lovable, especially in the second part, when the author has learned to know his character and has forgotten his initial goal of parodying novels of chivalry. This is true, because the more writers develop their characters, the better they get to know them. So, that's how we have a character who is sometimes ridiculous, but who can be serious and have profound thoughts, and above all is one of the most beloved characters in all of history. And we can say "of history" because Don Quixote is more real to us than Cervantes himself, as Unamuno and others have maintained.¹⁴ And as I have said, this happens above all in the second part, when the author has forgotten that intention of his to simply write a satire of the novels of chivalry. Then, as occurs with every long book, the author ends up identifying with the hero; he must in order to infuse him with life, to make him come alive. And at the end, Don Quixote is a slightly ridiculous character, but he is also a gentleman worthy of our respect, and sometimes our pity, but he is always lovable. And this is the same sensation we get from the image of Dr. Johnson,

given to us by Boswell, with his grotesque appearance, his long arms, his slovenly appearance. But he is lovable.

His hatred for Scots is also remarkable, something Boswell, the Scot, remarks upon. I don't know if I have told you that there is a fundamental difference in the way Scots and Englishmen think. The Scot tends to be—perhaps as a result of all their theological discussions—much more intellectual, more rational. Englishmen are impulsive; they don't need theories for their behavior. On the contrary, Scots tend to be thinkers and reasoners. Anyway, there are many differences.

So, let's return to Johnson. Johnson's works have literary value, but as is often the case, knowing the person and appreciating him gives one much more desire to read his work. That's why it's a good idea to read Boswell's biography before reading Johnson's work. Moreover, the book is very easy to read. I think Calpe has published an edition that is not complete but contains enough fragments for you to become familiar with the work. In any case, I recommend that you read that or another edition. Or, if you want to read it in English, the original is very easy to read, and does not need to be read in order, chronologically. It is a book you can open to any page with confidence that from there you can continue to read for thirty or forty pages, and everything is very easy to follow.

Now, in the same way that we have seen how Johnson is similar to Don Quixote, we have to think that just as Sancho is the companion Quixote sometimes treats badly, we see Boswell in that same relation to Dr. Johnson: a sometimes stupid and loyal companion. There are characters whose role is to bring out the hero's personality. In other words, often authors need a character who serves as a framework for and a contrast to the deeds of his hero. This is Sancho, and that character in Boswell's work is Boswell himself. That is, Boswell appears as a despicable character. But it seems impossible to me that Boswell didn't realize this. And this shows that Boswell positioned himself in

contrast to Johnson. The fact that Boswell himself tells anecdotes in which he appears ridiculous makes him not seem ridiculous at all, for if he wrote them down, he did it because he saw that the purpose of the anecdote was to make Johnson stand out.

There is a Hindu school of philosophy that says that we are not the actors in our lives, but rather the spectators, and this is illustrated using the metaphor of a dancer. These days, maybe it would be better to say an actor. A spectator sees a dancer or an actor, or, if you prefer, reads a novel, and ends up identifying with one of the characters who is there in front of him. This is what those Hindu thinkers before the fifth century said. And the same thing happens with us. I, for example, was born the same day as Jorge Luis Borges, exactly the same day. I have seen him be ridiculous in some situations, pathetic in others. And, as I have always had him in front of me, I have ended up identifying with him. According to this theory, in other words, the / would be double: there is a profound /, and this / is identified with—though separate from—the other. Now, I don't know what experiences you might have had, but sometimes this happens to me: usually at two particular kinds of moments—at moments when something very good has happened, and, above all, at moments when something very bad has happened to me. And for a few seconds, I have felt: "But, what do I care about all this? It is as if all of this is happening to somebody else." That is, I have felt that there is something deep down inside me that remains separate. And this, surely, is what Shakespeare also felt, because in one of his comedies there is a soldier, a cowardly soldier, the *Miles Gloriosus* of the Latin comedy. The man is a show-off, he makes people believe that he has acted bravely, and they promote him and he becomes a captain. Then they discover his trick, and in front of the entire troop they pull off his medals; they humiliate him. And then he is left alone and says: "Captain I'll be no more; / But I will eat and drink, and sleep as soft / As captain shall: simply the thing I am /

Shall make me live." "*No seré capitán.*" He says simply, "the thing I am shall make me live."¹⁵ That is, he feels that above and beyond the circumstances, beyond his cowardice, his humiliation, he is something else, a kind of strength we all have within us, what Spinoza called "God," what Schopenhauer called "will," what Bernard Shaw called "life force," and Bergson called "vital impulse."¹⁶ I think this is also what was going on with Boswell.

Perhaps Boswell simply felt it as an aesthetic necessity that to better showcase Johnson, there should be a very different character alongside him. Something like in the novels of Conan Doyle: the mediocre Dr. Watson makes the brilliant Sherlock Holmes stand out even more. And Boswell gives himself the role of the ridiculous one, and he maintains it throughout the entire book. Yet, we feel a sincere friendship between the two in the same way we feel it when we read Conan Doyle's novels. It is natural, as I have said, that this would be so; for Johnson was a famous man and alone, and of course he liked to feel by his side the friendship of a much younger man, who so obviously admired him.

There is another problem that comes up here, I don't remember if I have already mentioned it, and this is what led Johnson to devote his last years almost exclusively to conversation. Johnson almost stopped writing, besides the edition of Shakespeare, which he had to do because the publishers were demanding it. Now, this can be explained in a certain way. It can be explained because Johnson knew he liked to converse, and he knew that the gems of his conversation would be recorded by Boswell. At the same time, if it appears that Boswell had shown Johnson the manuscript, then the work would have lost a lot. We have to accept the fact, true or false, that Johnson was unaware of what it contained. But this would explain Johnson's silence, the fact that Johnson knew that what he said would not be lost. Now, [Joseph] Wood Krutch, an American critic, has

wondered if Boswell's book reproduces Johnson's conversations exactly, and he reaches the conclusion, in a very believable way, that Boswell does not reproduce Johnson's conversation as a stenographer would have done, or a recording, or anything like that, rather that he produces the *effect* of Johnson's conversation.¹⁷ In other words, it is very possible that Johnson was not always as epigrammatic nor as ingenious as he is presented in the work, though undoubtedly, after meetings at his club, his interlocutors retain memories much like that. There are sentences, in any case, that seem to be coined by Johnson.

Somebody said to Johnson that he could not imagine a more miserable life than a sailor's, that to see a warship, to see the sailors crowded together, sometimes whipped, was to see the nadir, the lowest depths of the human condition. And Johnson answered, "The profession of sailors and soldiers has the dignity of danger. All men feel ashamed at not having been at sea or in battle." This is in tune with the courage we feel in Dr. Johnson. And statements like this can be found on almost every page of the book. Again, I recommend you read Boswell's book. Now, it has been said that the book is full of "hard words," of "dictionary words." But we mustn't forget that words that are difficult for the English reader are easy for us, because they are intellectual words of Latin origin. On the other hand, as I have said more than once, the common words in English, the words of a child or a peasant or a fisherman, they are of Germanic, Saxon origin. So a book like Gibbon's—for example, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*—or the works of Johnson, or Boswell's biography, or, in general, the English books from the eighteenth century, or any contemporary intellectual English work—let's say the work of Toynbee, for example—abound in "hard words," in words that are difficult for the English (that demand some culture on the part of the reader), but they are easy for us because they are Latin words, that is, Spanish.¹⁸

In the next class we will talk about James Macpherson, about his polemic with Johnson, and about the origins of the romantic movement, which begins, we should never forget, in Scotland before any other country in Europe.

CLASS 11

THE ROMANTIC MOVEMENT. THE LIFE OF JAMES MACPHERSON. THE INVENTION OF OSSIAN. OPINIONS ABOUT OSSIAN. POLEMIC WITH JOHNSON. REAPPRAISAL OF MACPHERSON.

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 9, 1966

I am going to end this class ten minutes early today because I have promised to give a lecture on Victor Hugo. So, please forgive me, and it so happens that today we will be talking about the romantic movement in which Victor Hugo played such a large part.

The romantic movement is probably the most important movement in the history of literature, perhaps because it was not only a literary style but also a lifestyle. In the last century, we had Zola, the naturalist. And Emile Zola is inconceivable without Hugo, the romantic. We still have people who are nationalists or communists, and they are those things in a romantic way, even if they claim to have socio-economic or whatever other motives. I said there is a romantic lifestyle. For example, one famous case would be Lord Byron. Byron's poetry was excluded—unjustly in my mind—from a famous anthology of English literature published some years ago. But Byron still represents one romantic type. (Byron, who goes to Greece to die for the freedom of that country against the oppression of the Turks.) We have poets with romantic destinies: one of the greatest poets in the English language, Keats, dies of tuberculosis. One could say that an early death is part of a romantic

destiny. So, how can we define romanticism? The definition is difficult, precisely because we all know what it is. If I say “neo-romantic,” you know precisely what I mean, the same as if I talked about the flavor of coffee or wine; you know exactly what I am talking about, even if you couldn’t define it. It would be impossible to do so without employing a metaphor.

I would say, however, that romantic sentiment is a keen and pathetic sense of time, a few hours of amorous delight, the idea that everything passes away; a deeper sentiment for autumn, for twilight, for the passing nature of our own lives. There is a very important work of historical philosophy, *The Decline of the West*, by the Prussian philosopher Spengler, and in this book, which he wrote during the tragic years of the First World War, Spengler names the great romantic poets of Europe.¹ And on that list, which includes Hölderlin, Goethe, Hugo, Byron, Wordsworth, is James Macpherson, an almost forgotten poet, and he heads the list. Probably some of you are hearing his name for the first time. But the entire romantic movement is inconceivable, unthinkable, without James Macpherson. Macpherson’s destiny is very curious, the destiny of a man who has been deliberately deleted for the greater glory of his homeland, Scotland.

Macpherson was born in the Highlands of Scotland in 1736 and died in 1796. Now, the official date of the start of the romantic movement in England is 1798, that is, two years after Macpherson’s death. And in France, the official date would be 1830, the year of the *bataille de Harnani*, the year of the loud polemic between the partisans of the play *Hernani*, by Hugo, and its detractors. So, romanticism begins in Scotland and reaches England later—where it had been foreshadowed, but only foreshadowed, by the poet [Thomas] Gray, author of “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,” admirably translated into Spanish by the Argentine Miralla.² Then it reaches Germany through the work of Herder, and

spreads throughout all of Europe, reaching Spain fairly late.³ We could almost say that Spain, a country that figures so strongly in the imagination of the romantic poets of other countries, produced only one poet who was essentially romantic, the others being merely orators in writing. The one I am referring to is, of course, Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer, disciple of the great German-Jewish poet, Heine.⁴ And not a disciple of all of Heine's work, but rather of the beginning, of *Lyrisches Intermezzo*.

But let us return to Macpherson. Macpherson's father was a farmer; he was of humble origins, and his family, it seems, was not of Celtic but rather of English descent. (The English, even now, in Scotland, are scornfully called "the Saxons." This word is common in the spoken language of Scotland and also of Ireland.) Macpherson was born and raised in a wild place in the north of Scotland where a Gaelic language was still spoken, that is, a Celtic language, similar of course to Welsh, Irish, and the Breton language carried to Brittany, or *Bretagne*—formerly called Armorica—by the British who took refuge there during the Saxon invasions in the fifth century. That is why people say Great Britain, to distinguish it from small Britain, or Brittany, in France. And in France they call that region of the country where the Breton language is spoken *Bretagne*; the language was thought to be like a patois for a long time, only because the French did not understand either language, so they assumed they were similar, which is part of a deep ideology.

Now, Macpherson had only an oral knowledge of Gaelic. He could not read Gaelic manuscripts, which used a different alphabet. We can imagine an educated person from Corrientes, that is, a man with an oral knowledge of Guaraní, who cannot explain to us the language's grammatical rules.⁵ Macpherson studied at the primary school in his town, then at the University of Edinburgh. Many times he had heard the bards singing. I don't know if I already talked about them. You know that Scotland was divided—and in a

way it still is—into clans. This has been lamentable throughout Scotland's history, because the Scots have fought not only against the English and the Danes but have waged war among themselves. So, someone who has visited Scotland, as I have, is drawn to the sight of small castles atop the long, rather than high, hills of Scotland. These ruins stand out against the evening sky. And I say evening because there are regions in the north of Scotland where the sun shines—the word “shine” isn't quite right here—from dawn to dusk with a light that is like an evening light, and that cannot but make the visitor somewhat sad.

Macpherson had heard the bards. The great clans of Scotland had bards whose task it was to recount the history and great deeds of the family. They were poets, and of course they sang in Gaelic. In all the Celtic countries, literature was organized similarly. I don't know if I told you that long ago in Ireland, one had to study for ten years to have a literary career. One had to pass ten examinations. At first one could use only simple meters—let's say, the hendecasyllable—and could write only about ten different subjects. Then, once these exams were finished—which were given orally in a dark room—they gave the subject and the meter the poet was supposed to use, and they brought him food. Two or three days later, they would question the poet, then allow him to use other subjects and other meters. After ten years, the poet reached the highest grade, but to get there, he had to have a complete knowledge of history, mythology, law, medicine—which was understood as magic in those days—and he received a pension from the government. He ended up using a language that was so laden with metaphor, only his colleagues could understand it. He had the right to more provisions, more horses, and more cows than the kings of the small kingdoms of Ireland or Wales. Now, this same prosperity of the order of the poets also sealed its fate. Because according to the legend, there came a time when one king would hear his praises, sung by two of the principal poets of Ireland, and the king was not

well versed in the poets' gongoristic style; he didn't understand a single word that was sung. And he decided to dissolve the order, and the poets were left out in the streets. But among the great families of Scotland, a position a little inferior to the previous one was restored: that of a bard. And James Macpherson learned this when he was a boy. He was about twenty when he published a book titled *Fragments of Ancient Poetry Collected in the Highlands of Scotland, translated from the Gaelic or Erse Language*.⁶

The songs in this volume were of an epic nature. Something had taken place that we cannot now fully understand and that I will have to explain, but it is something easily comprehensible. In the eighteenth century, and for many centuries, it was thought that Homer was indisputably the greatest of all poets. In spite of what Aristotle said, the literary genre of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* became the superior genre. That is, an epic poet was inevitably considered superior to a lyric or elegiac poet. So, when the men of letters of Edinburgh—Edinburgh was a city that was no less, and perhaps even more, intellectual than London—when they knew that Macpherson had collected epic fragments from the Highlands of Scotland, they were very impressed, for it allowed them to entertain the possibility that an ancient epic poem existed, which would give Scotland literary supremacy over England, and above all over the other modern regions of Europe. And here there appears a curious character, Dr. Blair, author of a book on rhetoric that has been translated into Spanish, and that you can still find.⁷

Blair read the fragments translated by Macpherson. He did not know Gaelic, so he and a group of Scottish gentlemen provided Macpherson with a kind of stipend that would allow him to travel through the mountains of Scotland and collect ancient manuscripts—Macpherson had said he had seen them—and also write down songs by the bards of the great houses. James Macpherson accepted the mission.

He was accompanied by a friend better versed in Gaelic, who was able to read the manuscripts. And a little more than a year later, Macpherson returned to Edinburgh and published a poem called *Fingal*, which he attributed to Ossian; Ossian is the Scottish form of the Irish name Oisín, and Fingal is the Scottish form of the Irish name Finn.⁸

Naturally, the Scots wanted to nationalize those legends that were of Irish origin. I don't know if I have told you that in the Middle Ages, the word "Scotus" meant Irishman, not Scot. (So, we have the great pantheistic philosopher, Scotus Eriugena, whose name meant "Scotus," or "Irish," and "Eriugena," meant "born in Erin, Ireland."⁹ It is as if his name were "Irish Irish.") Now, what Macpherson did was collect some fragments that belonged to various cycles. But what he needed, what he wanted for his beloved Scottish homeland, was a poem, so he put those fragments together. Naturally, gaps had to be filled in, and he filled them with verses of his own invention—later we'll see why I call them verses. Also, we must be warned that the concept of translation that dominates now is not the same as that which dominated in the eighteenth century. For example, the *Iliad* of Pope, which is considered consummate, is what we would call today a very free version.

So, Macpherson publishes his book in Edinburgh, and he could have done a rhymed version, but fortunately he chose a rhythmic form based on the verses of the Bible, especially the Psalms. (There is a Spanish translation of *Fingal* published in Barcelona.) Macpherson attributes *Fingal* to Ossian, son of Fingal. Macpherson presents Ossian as an old blind poet who sings in the crumbling castle of his father. And here we already have the sense of time so typical of the romantics. Because in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and even in the *Aeneid*, which is an artificial epic, one feels time but does not feel that those things happened a very long time ago, and this is precisely what is typical of the romantic movement. There is a poem by Wordsworth that I would like

to mention here. He hears a Scottish girl singing—we'll come back to these lines later—and he wonders what she is singing about and says, "She is singing about old misfortunes, and battles that took place long ago." Spengler says that in the eighteenth century, they built artificial ruins, those ruins we can still see along the edges of lakes.¹⁰ And we could say that one of these artificial ruins is *Fingal*, by Macpherson, attributed to Ossian.

As Macpherson did not want the characters to be Irish, he made Fingal, Ossian's father, king of Morgen, which would be on the northwestern coast of Scotland. Fingal knows that Ireland has been invaded by the Danes. So he goes to help the Irish, defeats the Danes, and returns. If we read the poem now, we would find many phrases that belong to the poetic dialect of the eighteenth century. But these phrases, of course, would not have been noticed at the time; and what was noticed were what we would today call "romantic phrases." For example, there is a sentiment for nature, there's a part of the poem that talks about the blue mists of Scotland, about the mountains, the forests, the afternoons, the dusk. The battles are not described in great detail: grand metaphors are used, in the romantic style. If two armies clash in battle, the poem talks about two great rivers, two great waterfalls whose waters mix. And then we have a scene as follows: the king enters an assembly. He has decided to battle the Danes the following day. Before he says a word, the others understand the decision he has made, and the text says, "They saw the battle in his eyes, the death of thousands in his spear." And then the king goes from Scotland to Ireland "high in the prow of his boat." And fire is called "the red thread of the anvil," perhaps with distant echoes of kennings.

Now, this poem captured the European imagination. It had hundreds of admirers. But I am going to mention two quite unexpected ones. One was Goethe. If you do not find a version of *Fingal* by Macpherson, you can find in that exemplary romantic novel called *The Sorrows of Young*

Werther the translation of two or three pages, translated literally from English to German by Goethe. *Werther*, the protagonist of this novel, says, “Ossian”—of course he wouldn’t say Macpherson—“has displaced Homer in my heart.” (There is a word in Tacitus, one word—I don’t remember which, at this moment—that he uses to refer to German military songs, and at that time, the Germans were confused with the Celts, their enemies.)¹¹ All Europeans felt they were heirs to this poem—all of Europe, not only Scotland. Ossian’s other unexpected admirer was Napoleon Bonaparte. An erudite Italian, the *abate* Cesarotti, had rendered into Italian Macpherson’s Ossian.¹² And we know that Napoleon carried a copy of this book with him on all his campaigns from the south of France to Russia. In Napoleon’s harangues to his soldiers, which preceded the victories at Jena and Austerlitz, and the final defeat at Waterloo, echoes of Macpherson’s style have been observed. So, let these two illustrious and different admirers suffice.¹³

In England, on the contrary, the reaction was a bit different, or totally different, because of Dr. Johnson. Dr. Johnson despised and hated the Scots, even though his biographer, James Boswell, was Scottish. Johnson was a man of classical tastes, and the idea that around the sixth or seventh century, Scotland had produced a long epic poem must have greatly disturbed him. Moreover, surely Johnson felt the threat this new work—so full of the romantic movement—entailed to the classical literature he worshipped. Boswell wrote down a conversation between Johnson and Dr. Blair. Blair told him that there was no doubt about the antiquity of the text, and he asked him if he thought any man of a modern age could have written such poems. Johnson replied, “Yes, Sir, any man, many women, and many children.” Johnson also put forth an argument that was no less grave. He argued that as Macpherson had said the poem was a literal translation of ancient manuscripts, he should show those manuscripts.

According to some of Macpherson's biographers, he did try to acquire and publish them in some way. The polemic between Johnson and Macpherson became more and more heated. Macpherson finally published a book to prove the similarities between his poem and the texts. Be that as it may, Macpherson was accused of being a forger. Undoubtedly, if this had not happened, we would not see him today as a great poet. Macpherson spent the rest of his life promising to publish the manuscripts. He reached a point that he proposed publishing the originals, but in Greek, and this was, of course, a way of trying to gain time.

Today, we are not interested in whether the poem is apocryphal or not, but in the fact that it foreshadows the romantic movement. There is a polemic between Johnson and Macpherson that is still relevant, a rather lengthy exchange of correspondence between them. But in spite of Johnson, Macpherson's style—the style of Macpherson's *Ossian*—spread throughout Europe, and with it, the romantic movement was inaugurated; with it, the romantic movement is born. In England, we have a poet, Gray, who writes an elegy dedicated to the anonymous dead in a cemetery. We find in Gray's *Reliques of Ancient Poetry* the melancholic tone of romanticism.¹⁴ It includes translations of Scottish romances and ballads, and an extensive preface that asserts the fact that poetry is the work of the people. This work by Bishop Percy is important for its intrinsic value and because it inspired Herder's book, *Voices of the People*, which contains not only songs of Scotland but also German *Lieder*, traditional ballads, etcetera.¹⁵ With this book, the search for "the peoples'" creations spread to Germany.

We can see that without Macpherson and these elegies of Bishop Percy, the romantic movement would have arisen—it was almost historical, we could say—but with quite different characteristics. We should remark that nobody considered that the romantic movement had anything to do with Macpherson, or that he, as the author of *Fingal*, showed

remarkable originality. The versification he uses is a rhythmic prose never before used in any original work. So, for this fact alone we can consider him a precursor of Whitman and so many writers who have worked in free verse. Never could *Leaves of Grass* have been written, in the style Whitman employed, without the highly original work of Macpherson.

If there is one noble feature that we should keep in mind when we judge Macpherson, it is that he never wished to be considered a poet; what he wanted was to sacrifice himself for the greater glory of Scotland, for which he gave up fame and rejected the title of poet. We also know that he wrote a great amount of poetry and destroyed it when he realized that they were similar to the Scottish bards, without being theirs. So, he also renounced his own creations.

In the next class we will see how romanticism developed, now, in another country, England.

CLASS 12

LIFE OF WILLIAM WORDSWORTH. THE PRELUDE AND OTHER POEMS.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 14, 1966

Wordsworth was born in [Cockermouth], Cumberland, in 1770, and died as England's poet laureate in 1850. He comes from the family Lonsdale, which means "people of the border," a family that had been toughened through wars with the Scots and the Danes.

He studied at the local grammar school, then at Cambridge. In 1790, he went to France. Not long ago, something was discovered that caused a scandal. It was discovered that he had a love affair with Annette Vallon, who bore his child.

Wordsworth was a supporter of the French Revolution. About this, Chesterton said—many Englishmen supported the Revolution—that one of the most important events in English history was this revolution that was about to take place. [Wordsworth] was a revolutionary as a young man, then ceased to be. He ceased to be, and ceased to support the French Revolution, because it culminated in the dictatorship of Napoleon.

As far as his production, it is to a large extent devoted to geography. I remember that Alfonso Reyes said the same thing about Unamuno.¹ He said that in Unamuno, his feeling for the landscape replaced his feeling for music, to which he was quite insensitive. Wordsworth traveled on the continent a lot. He was in France, in the north of Italy, in Switzerland,

in Germany, and he also traveled through Scotland, Ireland, and, naturally, England. He settled in what is called the Lake District, also in the north of England, a little to the west, an area full of lakes and mountains similar to Switzerland, except the heights are not as considerable. However, I have visited both countries, and they make a similar impression. There's a story about a Swiss guide who went to the Lake District and did not at first realize the difference in the altitude of the highest peaks. The climate, moreover, is very cold in the Lake District, and it snows a lot.

Now, Wordsworth's life was devoted to poetry. He returned to England—he would never see Annette Vallon again—married an English girl, and had several children with her, all of whom died young. Wordsworth himself was orphaned at a young age, and he had the means to be able to devote himself exclusively to literature: to poetry and sometimes prose. He was an extremely vain man, a hard man. I think it is Emerson who recounts that he paid him a visit and made an observation, and Wordsworth refuted him immediately—as was his habit, because no matter what anyone said, he would assert the opposite—and ten minutes or a quarter of an hour later, Wordsworth expressed that same opinion that he had found absurd. Then Emerson politely said to him, “Well, that is what I told you a while ago.” And then Wordsworth, indignant, said, “Mine, mine, and not yours!!” And the other understood that one could not converse with a man with such a character. Moreover, like all poets who profess a theory, who are convinced of it, he came to believe that everything that fit into that theory was acceptable. And that is why Wordsworth's work is, like that of Milton, one of the most uneven in literature. He has poems that have melody, sincerity of passion, incomparable simplicity. And then we have large expanses of desert. Coleridge made this observation; he saw this difference. The truth is that Wordsworth wrote with great facility—he wrote when he was inspired, when the muse prompted him—and at other times, he wrote simply because he had decided to

produce a hundred, or however many lines of poetry that day. At first Wordsworth's theories and his practice seemed scandalous. Then they were accepted, and he was seen—as happens with all old poets who have not failed—he was considered a bit like an institution, so much so that they gave him the title of poet laureate, which he accepted. . . . We must remember that he was not only a good walker, he was also an excellent skater.

We will talk about Wordsworth's friendship with Coleridge later. The truth is they met around 1790 or thereabouts. Both were young, both were excited about the French Revolution. Coleridge suggested establishing a socialist colony in North America, along the banks of a great river, and they also shared the same aesthetic opinions. At the end of the eighteenth century, poetry—with the exception of Macpherson's prose, which I spoke about last time, and a few of Gray's poems—had turned into a poetic dialect, what has been called "pseudo-classicism." For example, a respectable poet did not talk about the breeze, he talked about the "soft zephyrs." He did not talk about the sun, he talked about "Phoebus." He preferred not to talk about the moon, the word was too common, so he talked about "chaste Diana." There was a whole poetic dialect based on classical mythology, a mythology that was already dead for readers and listeners; it was a poetic diction. Wordsworth planned to publish a book with Coleridge that would be called *Lyrical Ballads*, which appeared in the year 1798. This date is important in the history of English literature and in the history of European literature because it is a deliberately romantic document. That is, it came long before the works of Hugo and others.

When Wordsworth spoke with Coleridge, they agreed to divide the themes of the volume into two groups. One would deal with the poetry of common things, of common episodes, the common vicissitudes of every life. And the other, assigned to Coleridge, would deal with poetry of the supernatural. But Coleridge was very lazy, and he took

opium, he was an opium addict like the great poetic-prose writer De Quincey, and when it was time to publish the book, Coleridge contributed only two compositions, and Wordsworth had written all the rest.² And the book appeared with Wordsworth's signature, and it was said that the other two compositions were written by a friend who preferred not to be named.

A few years later a second edition appeared with a polemical preface by Wordsworth. In this preface, Wordsworth explains his theory of poetry. Wordsworth said that when a person acquires a book of poems, he hopes to find certain things in the book. And if the poet does not meet these expectations, if the poet disappoints, then the reader can think one of two things: he can think that the poet is indolent, incompetent, or he can think that he is a big fraud for not fulfilling his promise. Then Wordsworth talks about poetic diction. He says that all or almost all contemporary poets are looking for it. That he has taken as much pains to avoid it as others take to find it. Hence, the absence of poetic diction, of phrases like "soft Zephyrs," of mythological metaphors, etcetera, which have been deliberately excluded. And he says that he has sought plain language, more or less like spoken language but without its stuttering, hesitations, repetitions. Wordsworth thought that the most natural language was spoken in the countryside, because he thought that most words have their origins in natural things—we speak of the "river of time," for example—and that language is preserved in a purer state where people are constantly seeing the fields, mountains, rivers, hills, dawn, dusks, and nights. But, at the same time, he did not want to include any dialectical elements into his language. So, poems like *Leaves of Grass*, by Whitman, from 1855, or *Barrack-Room Ballads*, by Kipling, or Sandburg's contemporary poetry, would have horrified him.

Nevertheless, poetry written afterward is the result of Wordsworth, who said that poetry has its origin in the overflow of powerful feelings produced by the agitation of

the soul. Then the objection could have been made: if this is the case, it would be enough for a woman to leave a man, for a man's father to die, for poetry to be produced. And the history of literature shows that this is not the case. A person who is very emotional cannot express himself well. Wordsworth brings to bear here his psychological theory of the origins of poetry. He says that poetry comes from emotion recollected in tranquility. Let's imagine one of the subjects I mentioned: a man who is left by a woman he loves. At that moment, the man can sink into despair, can try to resign himself, can try to distract himself, drink alcohol, anything. But it would be very strange for him to sit down to write a poem. On the other hand, some time passes, a year, let's say. The poet is now more serene, and then he recalls all he has suffered, that is, he relives his emotions. But this second time, not only is he the author who remembers exactly what he suffered, what he felt, what made him despair, but he is also the spectator, a spectator of his past / . And that moment, says Wordsworth, is the most suited to the production of poetry, the moment of the feeling recalled and relived in tranquility. Wordsworth also wanted for there not to be any feelings in the poem other than those required by the subject, by the poet's primary impulse. That is, he totally rejected what are called the ornaments of poetry. That is, Wordsworth thought it was fine to write a poem about the emotion brought about by dawn in the mountains or in a city. But he thought it was bad to interweave a landscape or a description in a poem about another subject—the death or loss of a beloved woman, for example. Because he said this was to seek “a foreign splendor,” a splendor foreign to the main subject. Now, it is true that Wordsworth was a man of the eighteenth century, and it is given to no man, no matter how revolutionary, to differ wholly from his era. And so Wordsworth sometimes employs—and this makes some of his pages ridiculous—the same diction he himself censured. In one poem he speaks of a bird, then he doesn't see it again, and he thinks someone

might have killed it. And he wants to say, and says, that the men of the valley might have killed it with their rifles. But instead of saying it directly, he says: “the Dalesmen may have aimed the deadly tube” instead of “rifle.”³ This was somewhat inevitable.

Wordsworth wrote some of the most admirable sonnets of English poetry, usually about nature. And there is one famous one that takes place on Westminster Bridge, in London. This poem, like all of Wordsworth’s good poems, is sincere. He had always said that beauty was in the mountains, in the moors; nevertheless, in this poem, he says that he never had such a serene feeling as the one he had that morning when he crossed Westminster Bridge while the city was sleeping.⁴ There’s also a quite curious sonnet in which he is in a port, and he sees a ship arrive, and we could say he falls in love with it; he wishes it good luck, as if the ship were a woman.⁵

Now, Wordsworth also planned out two philosophical poems. One of them, *The Prelude*, was autobiographical, that is, the meditations of a solitary walker. And in it is a dream I am going to retell. One critic has observed that Wordsworth must have had dreams of startling clarity, because he has a poem titled “Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood,” which lays out his argument for immortality—based on the Platonic doctrine of the pre-existence of the soul. The poem is derived from recollections of childhood. In it, he says that when he was young, all things had a certain splendor, a kind of clarity that later became blurred. He says that things had “the freshness and glory of a dream.”⁶ And in another poem, he says that something is as “vivid as a dream.” We know that he had hallucinatory experiences. He was in Paris a little before what has been called the Reign of Terror, and from the balcony of his house, a tall house, he saw the sky crimson, and he thought he heard a voice prophesying death. Then, back in England, he had to pass at night

through Stonehenge, the circle of stones from before the Celtic era, where the Druids performed sacrifices. And he thought he saw the Druids with their stone knives—flint knives—sacrificing human beings. But now I'll get back to that dream.

Someone said that the dream had to have been dreamed by Wordsworth, but I believe—you can form your own judgment, of course—that the dream is too elaborate to really be a dream. Before telling it, Wordsworth tells us about the previous circumstances; the basis of the dream is in these circumstances, which are told with particular vividness. Wordsworth says that he had always been plagued by a fear, a fear that the two greatest works of mankind, the sciences and the arts, could disappear through some cosmic disaster. Nowadays, we have more right to this fear, given the progress of science. But at that time, this idea was very strange, to think that humanity could be erased from the planet, and along with humanity, science, music, poetry, and architecture. In other words, everything essential in mankind's labor throughout thousands of years and hundreds of generations. And Wordsworth says that he spoke with somebody about this, and that person told him that he shared the same fear, and that the day after that conversation he went to the beach. You will see how these circumstances lay the groundwork for Wordsworth's dream. Wordsworth arrives at the beach in the morning, and at the beach there is a cave. He seeks shelter from the sun's rays in the cave, but he can see the beach from it, the golden beach and the sea. Wordsworth sits down to read, and the book he is reading—this is important—is *Don Quixote*. Then the noon hour arrives—*la hora del bochorno* [the sultry hour], as they say in Spain—and he yields to the weight of the hour; the book falls from his hand, and then Wordsworth says, "I passed into a dream." In the dream he is no longer at the beach, in the cave facing the sea. He is in a huge desert of black sand, a kind of Sahara. Now, you can see that the desert, as well as its black sand, we are suggested by the

white sand on the beach. He is lost in the desert, and then he sees a figure approaching, and this figure is holding a shell in his left hand. And in the other hand he has a stone that is also a book. And this man approaches him at a gallop on his camel. Now, naturally you can see how the previous circumstances lay the groundwork, especially for an English mind. There is a relationship between Spain and the Arabs, and this rider on his camel, this rider with his spear, is a transformation of Don Quixote. The rider approaches Wordsworth, who is lost in that black desert. Wordsworth asks him for help, and he moves the shell close to the dreamer's ear. Wordsworth hears a voice "in an unknown tongue, which yet I understood," a voice that prophesies the destruction of the earth with a second flood. And then the Arab, with a grave demeanor, tells him that this is how it is, and that it is his mission to save the two capital works of humanity from this flood, this deluge. One is related "with the stars," "undisturbed by space and time." And this work is science. Science is represented by a stone, which is also a book. This kind of ambiguity is common in dreams. I have dreamed about someone who sometimes is someone else, or has someone else's features, and in the dream this did not surprise me; dreams can use that language. Then the Arab shows the stone to Wordsworth, who sees that it is not just a stone, it is Euclid's *Elements*, and this represents science. As for the shell, the shell is *all* books, all the poetry that has ever been written, is being written, will be written, by man. And he hears the whole poem like a voice, a voice full of despair, joy, passion. The Arab tells him that he has to bury—to save—those two important objects, science and art, represented by the shell and Euclid's *Elements*. Then the Arab looks out and sees something, then spurs on his camel. Then the dreamer sees something like a great light filling the earth and understands that this great light is the flood. The Arab is riding off. The dreamer runs after the Arab, asking him to save him, and the waters almost reach him just as he awakens.

De Quincey says that this most sublime dream needs to be read. But De Quincey believed that Wordsworth invented it. Needless to say, we will never know. I think that most likely Wordsworth had a similar dream that he then improved upon. In the dream, when the Arab rides off, Wordsworth follows him with his eyes, and sees that the Arab is sometimes an Arab on his camel and sometimes Don Quixote on his Rocinante. And then when he tells the dream, he says that perhaps he did not really dream it, that perhaps there actually is among the Bedouin tribes—the Arab is Bedouin—some madman thinking that the world will be flooded and he wants to save the sciences and the arts. You will find this passage—I don't know if it has been translated—in the second book of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth's long poem.⁷

Now, usually whenever Wordsworth is discussed, one discusses the poem "Intimations of Immortality," that poem I told you about, the one that mentions the Platonic doctrine. But I think what is special about Wordsworth is, besides a few ballads . . .⁸ There's a poem called "To a Highland Girl."⁹ And this is also the subject of one of the first poems Rilke wrote, that of a girl singing in the countryside, and of the song, and of the melody remembered many years later. Now, in Wordsworth's poem there is the added detail, mysterious for him, that the girl is singing in Gaelic, in Celtic, which he could not understand. And he wonders what the theme of the song is, and he thinks, "unhappy, far away things, and battles long ago." That music that filled the valley in waves, that music, continues resounding in his ears. Then we have the series about Lucy Gray, poems about a girl he was in love with. The girl dies, and he thinks that now she is part of the earth and is condemned to spin forever, like the stones and the trees. There is a poem about when the shadow of Napoleon fell over England, in a manner of speaking, as would fall the shadow of another dictator. This time, England was left alone to fight against Napoleon, much like in the

Second World War when it was again left alone. So Wordsworth writes a sonnet saying, "Another year has passed, another vast empire has fallen and we have been left alone to fight the enemy." And then the sonnet says that this circumstance must fill them with joy. "The fact that we are alone, the fact that we have nobody to depend on, that our salvation is in ourselves." And then he wonders if the men that rule England are up to their mission, to their high destiny. He asks "if they are really deserving of this earth and its traditions," and if they are not, he says, they are "a servile band"—at that moment he insults the government. If they are not a servile band, they are obliged to deal with "danger, which they fear," "and with honor, which they do not understand." . . . Then Wordsworth also wrote a play, and poems about different places in England.¹⁰

Now, Wordsworth always said that the language had to be simple, yet in these poems he achieves a splendor of language that he would have rejected in his youth, when he was still a fanatic for his own theory. He later writes, for example, about an antechamber in a chapel in Cambridge, where there is a bust of Newton, and he speaks of Newton, "with his prism and silent face," with his prism that he used to develop his theory of light. Then he says: "The marble index of a mind for ever traveling through strange seas of thought."¹¹ This has nothing to do with Wordsworth's initial theories. At the beginning, Wordsworth was a kind of scandal, he wrote a poem dangerously titled "The Idiot Boy" and Byron could not resist an easy quip, saying that it was an autobiographical poem.

People began to refute his theory. Even Coleridge told him that no poetry should be presented with an accompanying theory because it puts the reader on his guard. If the reader, he says, reads a polemical preface before reading a book of poems, he might suspect that the arguments in that preface have been formulated to persuade him to like the poems, hence he will reject it.

Moreover, Coleridge said, poetry should prevail on its own, the poet should not give any justification for his work. This now seems very strange because we live in an era of coteries, manifestos, publicity for the arts. However, Coleridge lived at the end of the eighteenth century, and the beginning of the nineteenth. Wordsworth had to explain to him, explain to his readers, so that they would not look for something in his poetry that wasn't there but rather see that he had deliberately chosen simple themes, humble characters, plain language, an absence of professional poetic metaphors, etcetera. Wordsworth is now considered one of the great poets of England. I talked about Unamuno.¹² I know that he was one of Unamuno's favorite poets. But then, it is very easy to find lazy pages in his work. Ezra Pound has done so, saying that Wordsworth was a silly old sheep. But I think a poet should be judged by his best pages.

I don't know if I have ever mentioned that Chesterton agreed to compile an anthology of the worst poems in the world as long as he was allowed to choose them from among the best poets. Because, Chesterton says, writing bad pages is typical of the great poets. When Shakespeare wanted to write a ridiculous page, Chesterton says, he sat down and did it without further ado, he enjoyed it. On the other hand, a mediocre poet might not have any very bad poems. He might not have them because he is conscious of his mediocrity, because he is constantly keeping watch on himself. Wordsworth, on the other hand, is conscious of his strength, and that is why there is so much ballast, so many dead zones in his work. But apart from this dream of Wordsworth's (I don't know why it has been excluded from the anthologies), Wordsworth's most important works—except maybe the one in which he speaks of the tall sailboat he falls in love with—are included in anthologies of English poetry.

The works have been translated many times, but the translation of English poetry into Spanish is, as I have

discovered, difficult, very difficult. Because the English language, like Chinese, is essentially monosyllabic. So, in a verse, more verses fit in an English line than in a Spanish line. How to translate, for example, "With ships the sea was sprinkled far and nigh like stars in Heaven": "*con barcos, el mar estaba salpicado aquí y allá como las estrellas en el cielo.*" Nothing is left in the translation, and yet the line is memorable.^{[13](#)}

Today I have spoken about Wordsworth. In the next class I will talk about his friend, collaborator, and, finally, polemicist, Coleridge, the other great poet from the beginning of the romantic movement.

CLASS 13

THE LIFE OF SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE. A STORY BY HENRY JAMES. COLERIDGE AND MACEDONIO FERNÁNDEZ, COMPARED. COLERIDGE AND SHAKESPEARE. *IN COLD BLOOD*, BY TRUMAN CAPOTE.

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 16, 1966

One of a writer's most important works—perhaps the most important of all—is the image he leaves of himself in the memory of men, above and beyond the pages he has written. Now, Wordsworth was himself a better poet than Samuel Taylor Coleridge, whom we will speak about today. But when one thinks of Wordsworth, one thinks of an English gentleman of the Victorian era, similar to so many others. When one thinks of Coleridge, on the other hand, one thinks of a character from a novel. All of this is interesting for a critical analysis and for the imagination, and so Henry James, the great American novelist, believed. Coleridge's life was a collection of failures, frustrations, unfulfilled promises, vacillations. There is a story by Henry James called "The Coxon Fund," which was inspired by his reading of one of the first biographies of Coleridge.¹ The protagonist of the story is a man of genius, a genius conversationalist, that is, someone who spends his life at the homes of his friends. They expect him to write a great work. They know that for him to carry out this work he needs time and rest. And the heroine is a young lady whose responsibility it is to choose the fellow for this foundation, the Coxon Foundation, established by one of her aunts, Lady Coxon. The young lady

sacrifices her chance to be married, sacrifices her own life, so that the person who receives the award will be a man of genius. The protagonist accepts the annuity, which is considerable, and then the author leaves us to understand—or he states it directly, I don't remember—that the great man writes nothing, barely a few rough drafts. And we can say the same thing about Samuel Taylor Coleridge. He was at the center of a brilliant circle, called the “Lake School,” because they lived in the Lake District. He was Wordsworth's friend and De Quincey's teacher. He was friends with the poet Robert Southey, who left among his many works a poem called “A Tale of Paraguay,” based on the texts of the Jesuit Dobrizhoffer, a missionary in Paraguay.^{2a} The members of this group considered Coleridge their master, they considered themselves inferior to him. Nevertheless, Coleridge's work, which fills many volumes, actually consists of only a few poems—unforgettable poems—and a few pages of prose. Some of the pages are in the *Biographia Literaria*; others are of lectures he gave about Shakespeare.³ Let's first look at Coleridge's life, and then we will examine his work, not infrequently unintelligible, tedious, and plagiarized.

Coleridge was born in 1772, two years after Wordsworth, who was, as you know, born in the year 1770, which is easy to remember. (I'm saying this now because you are about to have an exam.) Coleridge dies in the year 1834. His father is a Protestant vicar in the south of England. Reverend Coleridge was a vicar in a country town, and he impressed his listeners because he would always weave into his sermons what he called “the immediate tongue to the Holy Ghost.” In other words, long passages in Hebrew that his rustic parishioners did not understand, but which made them venerate him. When Coleridge's father died, his parishioners scorned his successor because he did not interweave unintelligible passages in the immediate language of the Holy Ghost.

Coleridge studied at Christ Church, where his classmate was Charles Lamb, who wrote a description of him.⁴ He then attended Cambridge University, where he met Southey, and there they planned to found a socialist colony in a remote and dangerous region of the United States. Then, for some reason that has never been fully explained, but is just one of the many mysteries that constitutes Coleridge's life, Coleridge enlists in a regiment of dragoons. "I am," as Coleridge said, "the least equestrian of men." He never learned to ride a horse. After a few months, one of the officers found him writing poems in Greek on one of the barrack walls, poems in which he expressed his despair at his impossible fate as a horseman, which he had inexplicably chosen. The officer spoke with him and managed to have him released. Coleridge returned to Cambridge and shortly thereafter planned to establish a weekly journal. He traveled around England looking for subscribers for this publication. He recounts that he arrived in Bristol, spoke with a gentleman, that this gentleman asked him if he had read the newspaper, and he answered that he did not believe that one of his duties as a Christian was to read the newspaper, which caused no small amount of hilarity, because everyone knew that the purpose of his trip to Bristol was to engage subscribers for his publication. Coleridge, after having been invited to join a conversation, took the strange precaution of filling half his pipe bowl with salt and the other half with tobacco. In spite of this, he became ill, as he was not in the habit of smoking. Here we have one of those inexplicable episodes in Coleridge's life: his carrying out of absurd acts.

The journal was finally published. It was called *The Watchman*, something like "*El sereno*" or "*El vigilante*," and actually consisted of a series of sermons, more than news; then it was closed a year later. Coleridge also collaborated with Southey on the writing of a play, *The Fall of Robespierre*, and another about Joan of Arc, who speaks about the Leviathan, for example, and magnetism, subjects

that surely never figured in the conversations of the saint.⁵ Otherwise, it can be asserted that he did nothing but converse. He wrote a few poems we will look at later, called "The Ancient Mariner" . . . another is called "Christabel," and another, "Kubla Khan," the name of that Chinese emperor who was Marco Polo's patron.⁶

Coleridge's conversations were very unusual. De Quincey, who was a disciple and admirer, said that each time Coleridge talked, it was as if he were tracing a circle in the air. In other words, he went further and further away from the subject he had started with, then returned to it, but very slowly. Coleridge's conversation could last for two or three hours. At the end, it was discovered that he had traced a circle, returning to the point of departure. But usually his interlocutors would not have lasted that long and would have left. So they carried away the impression of a series of inexplicable digressions.

Coleridge's friends thought that a good outlet for his genius would be for him to give lectures. In fact, his lectures were advertised and many people subscribed to the series. For the most part, when the date arrived, Coleridge would not appear, and when he did appear, he would speak about anything other than the subject that had been announced. And then there were times he spoke about everything, even the subject of the lecture. But those occasions were rare.

Coleridge married fairly young. The story is that he visited a house where there were three sisters. He was in love with the second one, but he thought that if the second got married before the first—that is, according to what he told De Quincey—this could wound the sexual pride of the first. And so, out of a sense of delicacy, he married the first, even though he was not in love with her. It is no big surprise to learn that the marriage failed. Coleridge had nothing to do with his wife and children and went to live with his friends. Coleridge's friends felt honored by his visits, honored. At first it was assumed that the visits would last a

week, then they lasted a month, and in some cases years. And Coleridge accepted this hospitality, not with ingratitude, but with a kind of absentmindedness, because he was the most absentminded of men.

Coleridge traveled to Germany, and he realized he had never seen the sea, in spite of having described it in his poem “The Ancient Mariner” in an admirable, unforgettable way. But he was not so impressed by it. The sea of his imagination was vaster than the real one. Then, another of Coleridge’s characteristics was to announce ambitious works—a history of philosophy, a history of English literature, a history of German literature. And he wrote to his friends—they knew he was lying, and he knew that they knew—that this or the other work was well under way, even when he hadn’t written a single line. Among the works he did complete is a translation of Schiller’s *Wallenstein* trilogy, which, according to some critics, among them Germans, is better than the original.

One of the themes that has most worried critics is that of Coleridge’s plagiaries. In his *Biographia Literaria*, he announces, for example, that he will devote a coming chapter to explaining the difference between reason and understanding, or between fantasy and imagination. And then the chapter in which he lays out these important differences ends up being translations of Schelling or of Kant, whom he admired. It has been said that Coleridge promised the printers that he would turn in a chapter, then turned in something plagiarized.⁷ What is most likely is that Coleridge had forgotten he had translated it. Coleridge lived what we could call a purely intellectual life. Thought interested him more than the writing of thought. I had a more or less famous friend, Macedonio Fernández, and the same was true about him.⁸ I remember that Macedonio Fernández moved around from one boardinghouse to another, and each time he moved he left behind a collection of manuscripts in a drawer. I asked him why he lost what he

wrote, and he answered, "What, you think we are so rich, we have something to lose? What I thought up once, I'll think up again, so I lose nothing." Perhaps Coleridge thought the same way. There is an article by Walter Pater, one of the most famous prose writers in English literature, who says that Coleridge, for what he thought, what he dreamed, what he carried out, and even more, "for what he failed to do," represents an archetype, we could almost say, of the romantic man. More than Werther, more than Chateaubriand, more than anyone else. And the truth is, there is something in Coleridge that seems to fill the imagination to overflowing. It is life itself, filled with postponements, unfulfilled promises, brilliant conversations. All of this belongs to a particular kind of human being.

What's curious is that Coleridge's conversation has been preserved, as was Johnson's; but when we read Boswell's pages—those pages full of epigrams, those short and clever sentences—we understand why Johnson was so admired as a conversationalist. On the contrary, the volumes of *Table Talk*—of Coleridge's after-dinner conversations—are rarely admirable. They abound in trivialities. Perhaps in a conversation, more important than what is said is what the interlocutor feels is lurking behind the spoken words. And undoubtedly there was in Coleridge's conversation a kind of magic that was not in the words but rather in what the words suggested, in what was revealed behind them.

Moreover, there are, of course, admirable passages in Coleridge's prose. There is, for example, a theory of dreams. Coleridge said that in our dreams we are thinking, though not with reason but with the imagination. Coleridge suffered from nightmares, and he noticed the fact that, even if a nightmare was horrific, a few minutes after waking up, the horror of the nightmare had disappeared. And this is how he explained it: he said that in reality—when awake, I mean, because nightmares are real for those who dream them—when awake, a man has been known to go insane because of a pretend ghost, a ghost invented as a joke. On the other

hand, we dream horrible dreams, and when we wake up, even if we wake up shaking, we calm down after five or ten minutes. And Coleridge explained it like this: he said that our dreams, even the most vivid ones, the nightmares, are part of an intellectual process. That is, a man is sleeping, there is a weight on his chest, and in order to explain that weight, he dreams that a lion is lying on top of him. Then, the horror of this image wakes him up, but all of this has been part of an intellectual process. That is how Coleridge explained nightmares, as imperfect, atrocious reasoning, but still works of the imagination—that is, intellectual processes—and that is why they do not mark us so deeply.

And all of this about dreams is very important when talking about Coleridge. In the last class, I told one of Wordsworth's dreams. In the next class, I will talk about Coleridge's most famous poem, "Kubla Khan," which is based on a dream. And this reminds us of the case of the first English poet, Caedmon, who dreamed of an angel who forced him to compose a poem based on the first verses of Genesis, about the origins of the world.

Next, Coleridge is one of the first who backed the Shakespeare cult in England. George Moore, an Irish writer from the beginning of this century, says that if the Jehovah cult came to an end, it would be replaced immediately by the Shakespeare cult. And one of the people who founded this cult, together with some German thinkers, was Coleridge. Speaking of the German philosophers, their ideas were almost unknown in England. England, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, had almost completely forgotten its Saxon origins. Coleridge studied German, as would Carlyle, and reminded the English of their connection to Germany and the Norse nations. This had been forgotten in England, and then came the Napoleonic Wars; the English and the Prussians were brothers in arms at the victory of Waterloo, and the English felt that forgotten ancient fraternity. And the Germans, through Shakespeare, felt it as well.

Among the manuscript pages Coleridge left, there are many written in German. He also lived in Germany. On the other hand, he never managed to learn French, in spite of the fact that half the vocabulary in English, almost two-thirds of it, is French words. And these are the words that pertain to the intellect, to thought. It has been said that somebody put in Coleridge's hand a book in French, and in the other, its translation into English. Coleridge read the English translation, then he went back and read the French text and failed to understand it. That is, Coleridge had an affinity with German thought, whereas he felt quite alienated from French thought. And so, Coleridge dedicated part of his life to a perhaps impossible reconciliation between the doctrine of the Anglican church, the Church of England, and the idealistic philosophy of Kant, whom he worshipped. It is strange that Coleridge would have been more interested in Kant than in Berkeley, for he would have found what he was looking for more easily in Berkeley's idealism.

And now we come to what Coleridge thought about Shakespeare. Coleridge had studied Spinoza's philosophy. You will remember that this philosophy is based on pantheism, that is, the idea that there is only one real being in the Universe, and that is God. We are attributes of God, adjectives of God, moments of God, but we don't really exist. Only God exists. There is a poem by Amado Nervo.⁹ In it, he expresses this idea: God *does* Exist. We are what does not exist. And Coleridge would have been completely in agreement with that poem by Amado Nervo. Spinoza's philosophy, as in the philosophy of Johannes Scotus Eriugena, talks about creative nature and nature that is already created: *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*.¹⁰ And it is well known that when Spinoza spoke about God, he used a word that was synonymous with God: "*Deus sive natura*," or "God or nature," as if both words meant the same thing. Except that *Deus* is the *natura naturans*, the force,

the impetus of nature—the life force, as Bernard Shaw would say. Coleridge applies this to Shakespeare. He says that Shakespeare was like Spinoza's God, an infinite substance capable of assuming all shapes. And so, according to Coleridge, Shakespeare based the creation of his vast work on observation. Shakespeare took everything out of himself.^{[11](#)}

In recent years, we have had the case of the American novelist, Truman Capote, who heard about a horrible murder that took place in a landlocked state in the United States. Two thieves entered the house of a man—the wealthiest man in town. The two thieves entered the house, killed the father, the wife, and one of the daughters.^{[12](#)} The younger murderer, and thief, wanted to rape the man's other daughter, but the other told him they could leave no living witness, and that anyway it was immoral to rape a woman, and they had to stick to their original plan (which was to kill all possible witnesses). Then they shot all four, and they were arrested. Truman Capote, who until then had written pages of very careful prose—in the style of Virginia Woolf, we could say—moved to this town in the middle of nowhere, gained authorization to visit the prisoners on a regular basis, and in order to win their trust, he told them some shameful episodes from his own life. The trial, thanks to the lawyers' skill, lasted a couple of years. The writer kept visiting the murderers, brought them cigarettes, became friends with them. He was with them when they were executed, then immediately returned to his hotel and spent the whole night crying. Before, he had trained his memory to take notes; he knew that when a person is questioned he tends to answer cleverly, and he didn't want that, he wanted the truth. And then he published the book, *In Cold Blood*, which has been translated into many languages. Now, that whole thing would have seemed absurd to Coleridge, and to Coleridge's Shakespeare. Coleridge imagined Shakespeare as an infinite substance similar to Spinoza's God. That is, Coleridge

thought that Shakespeare had not observed man, had not lowered himself to the mean chore of espionage, or journalism. Shakespeare had thought about what a murderer is, how a man can become a murderer, and that's how he imagined Macbeth. And just as he imagined Macbeth, he imagined Lady Macbeth, and Duncan, and the three witches. He imagined Romeo, Juliet, Julius Caesar, King Lear, Desdemona, Banquo's ghost, Hamlet, the ghost of Hamlet's father, Ophelia, Polonius, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, all of them. That is, Shakespeare was each of the characters in his plays, even the most insignificant. And in addition to all of them, he was also the actor, the businessman, the moneylender William Shakespeare. I remember that Frank Harris was writing a biography of Bernard Shaw, and he sent Shaw a letter asking him for facts about his personal life. Shaw answered him that he had almost no personal life, that he, like Shakespeare, was all things and all men. And at the same time, he added, "I have been all things and all men, and at the same time I'm nobody, I'm nothing."

So, we have Shakespeare compared to God by Coleridge, yet Coleridge in a letter to one of his friends confesses there are scenes in Shakespeare's work that seem unwarranted to him. For example, he thinks it is unwarranted that in the tragedy *King Lear*, one of the characters has his eyes pulled out on stage. But he piously adds, perhaps with more piety than conviction, "I have often wanted to find errors in Shakespeare, and then I have seen that there are no errors, I have seen that he is always right." That is, Coleridge was a Shakespeare theologian—like theologians are of God—and as Victor Hugo would be later. Victor Hugo quotes some coarse passages from Shakespeare, some errors in Shakespeare, some of Shakespeare's distractions, then majestically justifies them by saying, "Shakespeare is subject to absences in the infinite." And then he adds, "When dealing with Shakespeare, I accept everything as if I were an animal." And Groussac says that this extreme view proves Hugo's

lack of sincerity.¹³ We don't know if Coleridge sometimes lacked sincerity, or if he really meant it.

Today, we have looked at some of Coleridge's prose. In the next class, we will examine, not all of Coleridge's poems, which would be impossible, but the three most important ones, those that correspond, according to a recent Coleridge critic, to hell, purgatory, and paradise.

CLASS 14

COLERIDGE'S FINAL YEARS. COLERIDGE COMPARED TO DANTE ALIGHIERI. COLERIDGE'S POEMS. "KUBLA KHAN." COLERIDGE'S DREAM.

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 18, 1966

Coleridge spent his final years in a suburb of London, a wild and rugged place. He stayed there in the home of some friends. He had long since had nothing to do with his wife and children, having abandoned them, and he had also cut off from the circle of friends he'd had. He pulled away from them and moved to the suburbs. So his world also changed. He now lived in a world solely of mental activity, in which he spent his time in conversation, as we have already seen of others. But Coleridge was never left on his own: his friends and acquaintances continued to visit him.

Coleridge would welcome them and spend long hours conversing with them. He wrote in the garden of his friends' house and conversed, and these conversations were essentially monologues. For example, Emerson tells about how he went to visit him and how Coleridge spoke about the essentially unitary nature of God, and that after a while, Emerson told him that he had always believed in the fundamental unity of God. He was a Unitarian. Coleridge said to him: "Yes, that's what I think," then kept talking, because he did not care about his interlocutor.

Another person who went to visit him was the famous Scottish historian Carlyle. Carlyle said that he ruled over London from the heights of Highgate, where the commotion

of the city, the noise and the multitudes of London, could be seen from above. He had the impression that Coleridge was up there, stuck fast above human commotion and lost in his own thoughts, as if in suspension, or in a labyrinth, we could say. By that time he was writing very little, though he was always announcing the publication of vast works, of an encyclopedic or psychological nature. When Coleridge died, in the year 1834, his friends had the impression, that is, they felt, that he had already died a long time before. And there is a famous page written by the English essayist Charles Lamb, who had been a classmate of his, where he says, "I grieve that I could not grieve." Coleridge had turned into a kind of aesthetic ghost for many of them. But Lamb says that in spite of this, everything he himself has written, everything he is writing, and everything he would write later, he wrote for Coleridge. And he speaks—as all his interlocutors did—of Coleridge's splendid conversation. He says that his words were "the very music of thought." But people stopped thinking that as soon as they understood what he was saying. That's why he had no friends at that time. Well, many still loved him, they welcomed him into their homes, they sent him anonymous charity, as did De Quincey. (Coleridge accepted all of this as if it were something natural. He felt no gratitude or even any curiosity about these gifts from friends. He lived essentially for thought and in thought.) He was not very interested in contemporary poetry. He was shown some poems by Tennyson, by the young Tennyson, who was also famous for the musicality of his poetry. Coleridge said, "He seems not to have understood the essential nature of English verse," a judgment that is completely unfair. The fact is that Coleridge wasn't interested in other people. Nor was he interested in convincing an audience or convincing his interlocutor. His conversations were monologues; and he accepted visits from strangers, but that was because it gave him the opportunity to talk out loud. I said in the last class that Coleridge's poetic oeuvre, counted in pages, is considerable. The Oxford

edition [of his work] has three or four hundred pages. However, that of the distinguished Everyman's Library, which you will hear about—the word “Everyman” is the name of a play from the Middle Ages—is probably two hundred pages.¹ It is called *The Golden Book of Coleridge*, and is an anthology of his poetic oeuvre.² However, we can reduce that to five or six poems, and I will begin with the least important.

There is “France: An Ode.” There is a curious poem—not more than just curious—titled “Time, Real and Imaginary,” whose subject is the difference between the two existing times: abstract time, which is what can be measured by watches, and the one that is essential for expression, for fear, and for hope. Then there is a poem, chiefly of autobiographical interest, called “Ode on Dejection,” in which, as in Wordsworth's “Intimations of Immortality,” Coleridge speaks about the difference between the way he felt life when he was young and how he felt it later. He said he had contracted “the habit of despair.”³

And then, we come to Coleridge's three essential poems, those that have led some to call him the greatest poet or one of the greatest poets of English literature. Not long ago a book was published, whose author I don't remember, called *The Crystal Dome*.⁴ This book analyzes the three poems by Coleridge we are discussing today. The author says that these three poems of Coleridge's are a kind of miniature *Divine Comedy*, for one alludes to hell, one to purgatory, and the other to paradise. One of Dante's sons explained that the first part shows man as a sinner, as guilty; the second shows man as repentant, as penitents; and the third shows man as just and blessed.⁵ Speaking about Coleridge, it seems so natural to make these digressions. He would have done the same. I want to use this opportunity to say, as an aside, that we have no reason at all to assume that Dante, when he wrote *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*, wanted to describe those ultra-earthly regions

the way he imagined them. There is no reason at all to make that supposition. Dante himself, in a letter to Cangrande della Scala, said that his book could be read in four ways, that there were four levels for the reader.⁶ That is why I think it right what Flaubert said: that when Dante died, he must have been amazed to see that hell, purgatory, or paradise—let us assume he made it into the last region—did not match his imagination. I think that Dante, when he wrote the poem, did not believe that he had done anything more than find adequate symbols to sensitively express the conditions of sinners, penitents, and the righteous. As for Coleridge's three poems, we don't even know if he wanted to express hell in the first, purgatory in the second, and paradise in the third, though it is not impossible that he felt that way.

The first poem, which would correspond to the *Inferno*, is "Christabel." He began it in 1797, picked it up ten or fifteen years later, then finally abandoned it because he could not think up an ending. The plot, anyway, was difficult, and if the poem has endured—you will find it in every anthology of English literature—if the poem "Christabel" has endured it is thanks to its musical qualities, its magical atmosphere, its feeling of terror, rather than the vicissitudes of its plot. The story takes place in the Middle Ages. There is a girl, the heroine, Christabel, whose sweetheart has left her to join the Crusades. And she leaves her father's castle and goes to pray for the safe return of her lover. She meets a beautiful woman, and this woman tells her that her name is Geraldine, and that she is the daughter of a friend of Christabel's father, a friend who is now feuding with him. She tells her that she has been stolen, kidnapped by bandits, that she has managed to escape, and that is why she is in the forest. Christabel takes her to her house, brings her to the chapel, tries to pray, but she cannot. Finally, the two share the same room and during the night Christabel feels or sees something that reveals that the other woman is not really the daughter of her father's old friend but rather a

demonic spirit that has taken on the appearance of the daughter. Here, Coleridge does not specify how she reaches this conclusion. This reminds me of what Henry James said regarding his famous story—you probably know it, maybe you’ve seen a movie version of it—*The Turn of the Screw*.⁷ James said that there was no need to specifically name evil, that if in a literary work he specified it—if he said that a character was a murderer, or incestuous, or a heathen, or whatever—this would weaken the presence of evil, that it was better for it to be felt as a gloomy ambiance. And that is what happens in the poem “Christabel.”

The next day, Christabel wants to tell her father what she felt, which she knows to be true, but she is not able to because she is under a spell, a diabolical spell, that prevents her. The poem ends there. The father goes in search of his old friend. Some have conjectured that when Christabel’s sweetheart returns from the Crusades, he becomes the *deus ex machina*, the one who resolves the situation. But Coleridge never found an ending, and the poem has endured—as I said—because of its music.

We now come to the most famous of Coleridge’s poems. The poem is called “The Ancient Mariner.” Even the title is archaic. It would have been more natural to call it “The Old Sailor.” And there are two versions of the poem. It is unfortunate that the first version has not been anthologized by editors, and can be found only in specialized works, because Coleridge, who knew English deeply, decided to write a ballad in an archaic style, a style that was more or less contemporaneous with Langland or Chaucer; but then as he continued it, he wrote in a very artificial way. That language came to be a barrier between the reader and the text, and so in the version that is usually published, he modernized the language, I think with good reason. Coleridge also added some notes written in exquisite prose, which are like a commentary, but a commentary that

is no less poetic than the text.⁸ Coleridge did finish this poem, as opposed to his other works.

It begins with a description of a wedding. There are three young people on their way to church to attend the ceremony, when they meet up with the ancient mariner. The poem begins, "It is an ancient Mariner, / And he stoppeth one of three." "*Es un viejo marinero y detiene a uno de los tres.*" Then the mariner looks at him, touches him with his hand, his fleshless hand, but most important is the mariner's gaze, which has a hypnotic force. The mariner speaks and begins by saying, "There was a ship, there was a ship, said he."⁹ Then he forces the guest to have a seat on a rock as he tells him his story. He says he is condemned to wander from place to place, and condemned to retell his tale, as if to carry out a punishment. The young man is desperate; he sees the bride and the musicians enter the church, he hears the music, but "the Mariner hath his will," and he tells his story, which obviously happens in the Middle Ages.¹⁰ It begins with a ship, a ship that sets sail and sails south. This ship sails to the Antarctic and is surrounded by icebergs. All of this is written in a uniquely lively manner; each stanza is like a painting. The poem has been illustrated. In the *Biblioteca Nacional*, there is a copy, one by the famous French engraver Gustave Doré. These Doré illustrations are admirable, but lack a certain harmony. The same is true about Doré's illustrations of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Because every line of Dante's, or every line of Coleridge's, is vivid. Whereas Doré, like a proper romantic, a proper contemporary of Hugo, preferred the Bacchic qualities—the undefined, gloomy, and mysterious. Now, mystery is not at all missing from Coleridge's work, but each of the stanzas is clear, lively, and well drawn, as opposed to the chiaroscuro the illustrator indulged in.

The ship is surrounded by icebergs, and then an albatross appears. This albatross makes friends with the sailors; he eats out of their hands, and then a wind rises to

the north and the boat is able to make headway. The albatross accompanies them and they arrive, let's say, in Ecuador, more or less. And when the narrator reaches this point in the story, he cannot continue. The young man says, "*Que Dios te salve de los demonios que te atormentan.*" ["God save thee, ancient Mariner! From the fiends that plague thee thus!"] Then the ancient mariner says, "With my cross-bow I shot the Albatross." "*Con mis arbaleses maté al albatros.*"¹¹ Now we have an offense, an offense that has been committed out of a kind of innocence; the mariner himself does not know why he did it, but from that moment on, the winds cease to blow, and they enter a vast area of dead calm. The ship stops, and all the sailors blame the narrator. He wore a cross around his neck, but they force him to wear the albatross instead. Undoubtedly, Coleridge had but a vague idea of what an albatross was, imagining it much smaller than it really was.

The ship is becalmed, and it does not rain: "Water, water, every where and not a drop to drink." "*Agua, agua por todas partes y ni una gota para beber.*" And everybody is dying of thirst. Then, they see a boat approaching, and they think it will rescue them. But when it comes close, they see that the ship is the skeleton of a ship. And on this ship are two fantastical characters: one is death and the other is something like . . . something like a kind of red-haired harlot. It is "Death in Life." And the two play dice for the lives of the sailors. Death always wins, except in the case of the narrator, whom the red-haired woman, Death in Life, wins. They can no longer speak because their throats are so parched, but the sailor feels the others staring at him; he believes they think he is guilty of their deaths, of this horror surrounding them, and then they die. And he feels he is a murderer. The ship—that ghost ship—sails away. And the sea becomes rotten and filled with snakes. These snakes swim in the dark waters; they are red and yellow and blue. And he [the narrator] says, "The very deep did rot," "*el absimo estaba pudriéndose.*" He sees those horrible creatures, the

snakes, and he suddenly feels a beauty in those infernal beings. As soon as he feels that, the albatross falls from his neck into the sea, and it begins to rain. He drinks in the rain with his whole body, and then he is able to pray, and he prays to the Virgin. And then he speaks of “gentle sleep that slid into my soul.” Before that, to say that the ship was still, he says, “As idle as a painted ship upon a painted ocean.” Then it starts to rain. The mariner feels that the ship itself is drinking in the rain. Then when he awakens from that dream—that dream that means the beginning of his salvation—he sees a host of angelic spirits entering the dead bodies of his companions, who help him sail the ship. But they do not speak, and so the ship sails northward and returns to England. He sees his native village, the church, the chapel; a boat comes out to greet him, and he disembarks. But he knows he is condemned to wander the earth forever, telling his story, telling it to whomever he comes across.

In this ballad, “The Ancient Mariner,” two influences have been found. One is a legend about an English captain, a captain condemned to sail forever without ever reaching shore, near the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa. The second is the legend of the Wandering Jew. I don’t know if any of you, when you read Chaucer, read the story of “The Pardoner’s Tale.” In that, there also appears an old man who strikes the earth with a staff looking for a tomb, and this old man might be a reference to the Wandering Jew, condemned to roam the earth until the day of the Final Judgment.¹² And surely Coleridge also knew the various Dutch legends that inspired the musical drama by Wagner, “The Pardoner’s Tale,” and the story of the Wandering Jew.¹³

And now we come to a no less famous poem by Coleridge called “Kubla Khan.” Kublai Khan was the famous emperor who received in his court the famous Venetian traveler, Marco Polo. He was one of those who revealed the Orient to the West. The story of the composition of this poem—written in 1798 and which Coleridge could not complete;

it was included in *Lyrical Ballads*—is quite curious. There is a book by an American professor named Livingston Lowes about the sources of “Kubla Khan.”¹⁴ The library of Southey, a Lake poet and author of a famous biography of Nelson, has been preserved. And in this library are the books that Coleridge was reading at that time, and there are passages he has marked. In this way, Livingston Lowes reached the conclusion that, although “Kubla Khan” is one of the most original compositions in all of English poetry, there is virtually no single line that has not been derived from a book. In other words, there are hundreds of sources for “Kubla Khan,” even though at the same time, the poem is, I repeat, original and incomparable.

Coleridge says that he was sick, and the doctor recommended he take a dose of laudanum, that is, opium. In any case, taking opium was very common at that time. (Later, if there is time, I will say a few words about a distinguished poetic prose writer of the time, one of Coleridge’s disciples, Thomas De Quincey, whose *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* was partially rendered into French by Baudelaire under the title *Les Paradis Artificiels, Artificial Paradises*.) Coleridge says that at the time he was living on a farm, and was reading a book by Purchas, a writer from the sixteenth or seventeenth century, I think, and in it, he read a passage about Emperor Kublai Khan, who is the Kubla Khan of his poem.¹⁵ The passage has been found and is quite short. It says that the emperor ordered trees to be cut down in a forested area through which a river ran, and there he constructed a palace or a hunting pavilion, and he built a high wall around it. This is what Coleridge read. Then, still under the influence of his readings, and undoubtedly also under the influence of opium, Coleridge had a dream.

Now, this dream was sad. It was a visual dream, because Coleridge dreamt, he saw, the construction of the Chinese emperor’s palace. At the same time, he heard

music, and he knew—the way we know things in dreams, intuitively, inexplicably—that the music was building the palace, that the music was the architect of the palace. There is, moreover, a Greek tradition that says that the City of Thebes was built by music. Coleridge, who could have said as did Mallarmé, “I have read every book,” could not have been unaware of this. So, Coleridge, in the dream, watched the palace being built, heard music he had never heard before—and now comes the extraordinary part—he heard a voice that recited the poem, a poem of a few hundred lines. Then he awoke, and remembered the poem he had heard in his dreams, the way the verses had been given to him—as had happened to his ancestor, Caedmon, the Anglo-Saxon shepherd—and he sat down and wrote the poem.

He wrote about seventy lines, and then a man from the neighboring farm of Porlock came to visit him, a man who has since been cursed by all lovers of English literature. This man talked to him of issues of rural life. The visit lasted a couple of hours, and by the time Coleridge managed to free himself and pick up where he had left off writing down the poem given to him in his dream, he found that he had forgotten it. Now, for a long time it was believed that Coleridge began the poem, that he did not know how to end it—as happened to him with “Christabel”—and then he invented this fantastic story about a triple—an architectural, musical, poetic—dream. This is what Coleridge’s contemporaries thought. Coleridge dies in the year 1834, and ten or twenty years later a translation is published, I don’t know if Russian or German, of a universal story, the work of a Persian historian. That is, a book that Coleridge could not have possibly read. And in that book, we read something as marvelous as the poem. We read that Emperor Kublai Khan had built a palace that the centuries would destroy, and that he built it according to plans that had been revealed to him in a dream. Here, the philosophy of [Alfred North] Whitehead comes to mind, which says that time is continually bringing lucre to eternal things, Platonic

archetypes. So we can think about a Platonic idea—a palace that wants to exist not only in eternity but also in time—and that through dreams, it is revealed to a Chinese medieval emperor and then, centuries later, to an English poet at the end of the eighteenth century. The event, of course, is unusual, and we can even imagine how the dream continues: we don't know what other form the palace will look for to fully exist. As architecture, it has disappeared, and poetically, it exists only in an unfinished poem. Who knows how the palace will define itself a third time, if there ever is a third time?

Now let us look at the poem. The poem mentions a sacred river, the Alph. This might correspond to the Alpheus River of classical antiquity. And it begins like this:

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.

Here we have the alliteration that Coleridge used in “The Ancient Mariner,” when he said: “The furrow followed free; / We were the first that ever burst / Into that silent sea.” (The *f* and then the *s*.) In other words, in Xanadu—which could be an ancient name for Peking—Kubla Khan decreed—ordered—the construction of a large pleasure pavilion or hunting pavilion where Alph, the sacred river, ran through caverns that men could not measure, to a sunless sea, to a deep and underground sea.

Then Coleridge imagines a vast cavern the sacred river runs through, where he says there are blocks of ice. And then he mentions how odd the garden is, that garden surrounded by green forests, all of it constructed over an abyss. Now, this is why it has been said that this poem is about paradise, for this could be a transposition of God, whose first work, as Francis Bacon reminds us, was a garden,

Eden. So we can think about the universe being built on emptiness. And Coleridge, in the poem, says that the emperor leaned over the black cavern of underground water, and there he heard voices that prophesied war. And then the poem moves from this dream to another one. Coleridge says that in the dream, he remembered another dream, and in that dream, there was an Abyssinian maiden on a mountain who sang and played the laud. He knows that if he could remember this maiden's music, he could rebuild the palace. Then he says that everyone would look at him in horror, everyone would realize that he had been bewitched.

The poem ends with those four enigmatic lines that I will first say in Spanish, then in English: "*Tejí a su alrededor un triple círculo, / y miradlo y contempladlo con horror sagrado, / porque él se ha alimentado de hidromiel, / y ha bebido la leche del Paraíso.*" "Weave a circle round him thrice, / And close your eyes" . . . No . . . "*Tejed a su alrededor un triple círculo y cerrad vuestros ojos con horror sagrado.*" . . . Nobody can look at him. . . . "And close your eyes with holy dread, / For he on honey-dew hath fed . . . " "*Porque él se ha alimentado del rocío de la miel.*" "And drunk the milk of Paradise." A lesser poet might have spoken of "the wine of Paradise," which would be terrible; but no less terrible is it to speak, as in this poem, of "the milk of Paradise."

These poems, of course, cannot be read in translation. In translation all that remains is the plot, but you can easily read them in English, especially the second one, "Kubla Khan," whose music has never since been equaled. It is about seventy lines long. We don't know, we cannot even imagine, a possible ending to this poem.

Finally, I would like to emphasize how marvelous, how almost miraculous it is that in the last decade of that reasonable, that very admirable eighteenth century, a poem was composed that is totally magical, a poem that exists above and beyond reason and against reason through the magic of fable, the magic of music.

CLASS 15

THE LIFE OF WILLIAM BLAKE. THE POEM "THE TYGER."
BLAKE AND SWEDENBORG'S PHILOSOPHY, COMPARED. A
POEM BY RUPERT BROOKE. BLAKE'S POEMS.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 21, 1966.

We are now going to go back in time, for today we are going to talk about William Blake, who was born in London in 1757 and died in that city in 1827.¹

The reasons I have postponed the study of Blake are easily explained, because my goal was to explain the romantic movement based on certain representative figures: Macpherson, the precursor; and then the two great poets, Wordsworth and Coleridge. William Blake, on the contrary, remains not only outside the pseudo-classic school (to use the most elevated term), and that is the school represented by Pope, but he also remains outside the romantic movement. He is an individual poet, and if there is anything we can connect him to—for, as Rubén Darío said, there is no literary Adam—we would have to connect him to much more ancient traditions: to the Cathar heretics in the south of France, the Gnostics in Asia Minor and Alexandria in the first century after Christ, and of course to the great and visionary Swedish thinker, Emmanuel Swedenborg. Because Blake was an isolated individual, his contemporaries considered him a bit mad, and perhaps he was. He was a visionary—as Swedenborg had been, of course—and his works circulated very little during his lifetime. Moreover, he was better known as an engraver and a draftsman than as a writer.

Blake was personally a quite unpleasant man, an aggressive man. He managed to make enemies out of his contemporaries, whom he attacked with ferocious epigrams. The events of his life are less important than what he dreamed and saw. However, we will make note of certain circumstances. Blake studied engraving, and he illustrated some important works. He illustrated, for example, the works of Chaucer, Dante, and also his own work. He married, and like Milton, he believed in polygamy, although he did not practice it so as not to offend his wife. He lived alone, isolated, and is one of the many fathers of free verse, inspired a little—like Macpherson before him and Walt Whitman after him—on Bible verses. But he comes long before Whitman, for *Leaves of Grass* appeared in 1855, and William Blake, as I have said, died in 1827.

Blake's work is extraordinarily difficult to read because he created a theological system. In order to express it, he had the idea of inventing a mythology, and critics don't agree on what it means. We have Urizen, for example, which is time. We have Orc, which is a kind of redeemer. And then we have goddesses with strange names like Oothoon. There is a divinity named Golgonooza, as well. There is an otherworldly geography of his invention, and there are characters named Milton—Blake came to believe that Milton's soul had been reincarnated in him to recant the errors Milton committed in *Paradise Lost*. Moreover, these same divinities in Blake's private pantheon change meaning, but not name; they keep evolving along with his philosophy. For example, there are four Zoas. There is also a character named Albion, Albion of England. The daughters of Albion appear, and so does Christ, but this Christ is not at all the Christ of the New Testament.

Now, there is a quite extensive bibliography of works on Blake. I have not read all of it, I don't think anybody has. But I think the most lucid book about Blake is by the French critic Denis Saurat.² Saurat has also written about the philosophy of Hugo and Milton, considering all of them in

the same tradition as the Jewish Kabbalah, and before that, the Gnostics of Alexandria and Asia Minor (Saurat actually speaks little about the Gnostics and prefers to discuss the Cathars and the Kabbalists, who are closer to Blake). He says almost nothing about Swedenborg, who was Blake's most direct mentor. Quite characteristically, Blake rebelled against Swedenborg and speaks of him with disdain.³ What we can say is that all through Blake's oeuvre, all through his nebulous mythologies, there is one problem that has always worried philosophical thinkers, and that is the idea of evil—the difficulty of reconciling the idea of a benevolent and omnipotent God with the presence of evil in the world. Naturally, when I speak about evil, I am thinking not only about betrayal or cruelty, but also about the physical presence of evil: illness, old age, death, the injustices that every man must suffer, and the different forms of bitterness we find in life.

There is a poem by Blake—it is included in all the anthologies—where this problem is expressed, but of course is not resolved. It corresponds to Blake's third or fourth book, his *Songs of Experience* (prior to that, he published *Songs of Innocence* and the *Book of Thel*, and in these books he talks mostly about a love and a kindness that are behind the universe in spite of all apparent suffering).⁴ In *Songs of Experience*, Blake deals directly with the problem of evil, and he symbolizes it, in the manner of the bestiaries of the Middle Ages, as a tiger. The poem, which consists of five or six stanzas, is called "The Tyger," and was illustrated by the author.

This poem is not about a real tiger, but rather an archetypal tiger, a Platonic, eternal tiger. The poem begins like this—I will translate the lines into Spanish, quickly and poorly:

*Tigre, tigre ardiente
que resplandeces en las selvas de la noche*

*Qué mano inmortal o qué ojo
pudo forjar tu terrible simetría?*

[Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye,
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?]

Then he wonders how the tiger was formed, in what forge, with what kinds of hammers, and then he reaches the principal question of the poem:

*Cuando los hombres arrojaron sus lanzas,
y mojaron la tierra con sus lágrimas,
A quel que te hizo sonrió?
A quel que hizo al cordero te hizo?*

[When the stars threw down their spears,
And watered heaven with their tears,
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?]

That is: How could God—omnipotent and merciful—have created the tiger and the lamb that would be devoured by it?

Then “Did he smile his work to see?” “He” is God, of course. That is, Blake is entranced by the tiger, the symbol, the emblem of evil. And we could say that the rest of Blake’s oeuvre is devoted to answering this question. Needless to say, this question has preoccupied many philosophers. We have Leibniz in the eighteenth century.⁵ Leibniz said we live in the best of all possible worlds, and he invented an allegory to justify this affirmation. Leibniz imagines the world—not the real world, but rather the possible world—as a pyramid, one with a top but no base. That is, a pyramid that can continue infinitely, indefinitely, downward. The

pyramid has many floors. And Leibniz imagines a man who lives his entire life on one of those floors. Then his soul reincarnates to a higher floor, and this continues an indeterminate number of times. And finally he arrives at the highest floor, the top of the pyramid, and he believes he is in paradise. And then he remembers his previous lives, and the inhabitants of this floor remind him, tell him, that he is on Earth. That is, we are in the best of all possible worlds. And to make fun of this doctrine, somebody, I think it was Voltaire, called it “optimism,” and when he wrote *Candide*, he wanted to show that in this “best of all possible worlds,” there exists, nonetheless, illness, death, the earthquake in Lisbon, the difference between rich and poor. And somebody called this, also a bit jokingly, “pessimism.” So the words “optimism” and “pessimism” that we now use—we call a person an optimist when we want to say he is in a good mood or he tends to see the bright side of things—were invented as a joke to poke holes in Leibniz’s doctrine and in the ideas of Swift and Voltaire—pessimists—who asserted that it was Christianity that stated that this world was a vale of tears, asserting the bitterness of our lives.

Such arguments were used to justify evil, to justify cruelty, envy, or a toothache, we could say. It was said that in a painting there could not be only beautiful and shimmering colors but also others; or also, it was said that music needed moments of disharmony. And this Leibniz, who liked ingenious but misleading illustrations, imagined two libraries. One contains a thousand copies, let us say, of the *Aeneid*, considered a perfect work. In the other library, there is only one copy of the *Aeneid* and nine hundred and ninety-nine inferior books. And then Leibniz wonders which of the two libraries is better, and he reaches the obvious conclusion that the second one, containing a thousand books of different qualities, is superior to the first, which contains a thousand copies of the same perfect book. And Victor Hugo would say later that the world had to be

imperfect, because if it were perfect, it would be mistaken for God—the light would be lost in the light.

These examples seem false to me. Because it is one thing that in a painting there are dark areas, that in a library there are imperfect books, and it is quite another that in the soul of a man there have to be such books and such colors. And Blake sensed this problem. Blake wanted to believe in an all-powerful and benevolent God. At the same time, he felt that in this world, in a single day of our lives, there are events that we would have wished had gone differently. So, perhaps under the influence of Swedenborg, or maybe some other influences, he finds a solution. The Gnostics—philosophers in the first centuries after Christ—came up with this solution. According to the explanation of the system given by Irenaeus, they imagined a first God.⁶ That God was perfect, immutable, and from that God emanate seven gods, and those seven gods correspond to the seven planets—the sun and the moon were considered planets at that time—and they allow seven other gods to emanate from them. In this way, there rises a high tower with 365 floors. (This corresponds to the days of the year.) Each instance, each one of those conclaves of gods, is less divine than the previous, and so on the bottom floor, the fraction of their divinity is close to zero. And it is the god on the floor below floor 365 that created the earth. And that is why there is so much imperfection on earth: it was created by a god who is a reflection of a reflection of a reflection, and so on, of all the higher gods.

Now Blake, through his entire oeuvre, distinguishes between the Creator God, who would be Jehovah from the Old Testament—the one who appears in the first chapters of the Pentateuch, in Genesis—and a much higher god. In this case, according to Blake, the earth would have been created by an inferior god, and this is the god who gives the ten commandments, moral law; and then a much higher god sends Jesus Christ to redeem us. That is, Blake creates an opposition between the Old Testament and the New

Testament whereby the god who created the world is the one who imposes moral law—that is, restrictions, the idea that you should not do this, or not do that. Then Christ comes to save us from those laws.

Historically, this is not true, but Blake stated that this is what the angels and demons revealed to him in special revelations. He said that he had conversed with them many times as had the Swedish Emmanuel Swedenborg, who also died in London and who also conversed frequently with demons and angels. Now, Blake arrives at the theory that this world—the work of an inferior god—is an hallucination, that we are being deceived by our senses. Previously it had been stated that our senses are imperfect instruments. For example, Berkeley already pointed out that if we see a distant object, we see it as small. We can touch a tower or the moon with our hand. Nor do we see the infinitely small, nor do we hear what is said far away. We could add that if I touch this table, for example, I feel it as smooth; but all it would take is a microscope to show me that this table is rough, uneven, that in reality, it consists of a series of ridges, and as science has shown, a jumble of atoms and electrons.

But Blake went further. Blake believed that our senses deceive us. There is a poem by an English poet who died during the First World War, [Rupert] Brooke, where this idea is expressed quite beautifully, and it can help you if you remember it. He says that when we have left our bodies behind, when we become pure spirit, then we can really touch: “*ya que no tendremos manos para tocar, y veríamos, no ya cegados por nuestros ojos*”: “And touch who have no longer hands to feel / And see no longer blinded by our eyes.”⁷ And Blake said that if we could cleanse our “doors of perception”—a phrase used by Huxley in a book about mescaline that was recently published—we would see things as they are, as infinite.⁸ That is, we are now living in some kind of dream, an hallucination that has been imposed on us

by Jehovah, the inferior god who created the earth, and Blake wondered if what we see as birds—a bird cutting through the air in flight—is not really a delightful universe hidden to us by our five senses. Now, Blake writes against Plato, even though Blake is profoundly Platonic, for Blake believes that the true universe is inside ourselves. You have probably read that Plato said that to learn is to remember, that we already know everything. And Bacon added that not knowing is having forgotten, which becomes the obverse of the Platonic doctrine.

So, for Blake there are two worlds. One, the eternal one—paradise—is the world of the creative imagination. The other is the world in which we live, deceived by the hallucinations imposed on us by our five senses. And Blake calls this universe “the vegetable universe.” Here, we can see the enormous difference between Blake and the romantics, because the romantics felt reverence for the universe. In a poem, Wordsworth speaks of a divinity “whose dwelling is the light of the setting suns, the round ocean and the living air,” *“una divinidad cuya morada es la luz de los soles ponientes y el Redondo océano y el aire viviente.”*⁹ Whereas all this was abhorrent to Blake. Blake said that if he watched the sunrise, what he was really seeing was a kind of silver coin rising in the sky. If, however, he saw or thought of the dawn with his spiritual eyes, then he saw hosts, numerous luminous hosts of angels. He said that the spectacle of nature shuts down all his inspiration. A painter and contemporary, [Sir Joshua] Reynolds, said that the artist who draws or paints should start out working from models, and this made Blake indignant. He said, “For Reynolds, the world is a desert, a desert that must be sown with observation. For me, no. For me, the universe is in my mind; and what I see is pale and very poor compared to the world of my imagination.”

Now we will return to Swedenborg and Christ, because this is important for Blake’s philosophy. In general it was believed that man, in order to be saved, had to be saved

ethically, that is, if a man is just, if he is forgiving and loves his enemies, if he does not do bad deeds, that man is already saved. But Swedenborg goes one step further. He says that man cannot be saved through his behavior, that the duty of every man is to cultivate his intelligence. And Swedenborg gives an example of this. He imagines a poor man, and this poor man's only desire is to get to Heaven. So he retreats from the world, goes to the desert, let's say to Thebaid, and lives there without committing a single sin. At the same time, he leads an impoverished mental life—the typical life of cenobites, or hermits. Then, after many years, the man dies and goes to Heaven. When he reaches Heaven, Heaven is much more complex than Earth. The general tendency is to imagine Heaven as disembodied. On the contrary, this Swedish mystic saw Heaven as much more concrete, more complex, richer than Earth. He said, for example, that here we have the colors of the rainbow and the nuances of those colors, but in Heaven, we see an infinite number of colors, colors we cannot even imagine. Shapes, as well. That is, a city in Heaven would be much more complex than a city on Earth, our bodies would be more complex, furniture would be more complex, and thought would as well.

So the poor saintly man reaches Heaven, and in Heaven there are angels who speak about theology; there are churches—Swedenborg's Heaven is a theological Heaven. And the poor man wants to participate in the angels' conversations, but naturally he is lost. He is like a country hick, a peasant who arrives in the city and feels dizzy. At first, he tries to console himself, thinking that he is in Heaven, but then this Heaven bewilders him, gives him vertigo. So he talks to the angels and asks them what he should do. The angels tell him that by devoting himself to pure virtue he has wasted his time on Earth to learn. Finally, God finds a solution—a somewhat sad solution but the only one possible. Sending him to Hell would be terribly unjust, for that man could not live among the devils. Nor need he

suffer the torments of envy, hatred, the fires of Hell. And keeping him in Heaven would be condemning him to vertigo, the incomprehension of that much more complex world. So, they look for a place for him in space, and they find one, and there, they allow him to again project his world of the desert, the chapel, the palm tree, the cave. And now that man is there, as he was on Earth, but more unhappy, because he knows that this abode is his eternal abode, the only possible abode for him.

Blake takes this idea and says, directly: "*Despojaos de la santidad y revestíos de la inteligencia.*" ["Relinquish holiness and summon intelligence."] And then, "*El imbécil no entrará en el Cielo por santo que sea.*" ["The fool shall not enter into Heaven, let him be ever so holy."] ¹⁰ That is, Blake also offers man intellectual salvation. We have the duty to be just as well as intelligent. Now, Swedenborg reached this point, but Blake goes further. Swedenborg was a man of science, a visionary, a theologian, etcetera. But he did not have much of an aesthetic sensibility. Blake, however, had a powerful aesthetic sense, and he said that man's salvation had to be threefold. He had to be saved through virtue—that is, Blake condemns cruelty, evil, envy—through intelligence—man should try to understand the world, develop intellectually—and through beauty—that is, through the practice of art. Blake preached that the idea of art is the patrimony of a select few, who must in one way or another be artists. Now, since he wants to link his doctrine to that of Jesus Christ, he says that Christ was also an artist, for Christ's ideas are never expressed abstractly (Milton never understood this), but rather through parables, that is, in poems. Christ says, for example, "I did not come to bring peace," and an abstract understanding would be, "I did not come to bring peace, but war." But Christ, who is a poet, says, "I did not come to bring peace, but a sword." When they are about to stone an adulterous woman to death, he doesn't say that the law is unjust, but rather writes some words in the sand. He writes some words: surely the law that

condemns the sinning woman. Then he erases them with his elbow, anticipating “the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” And he says, “He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone.” That is, he uses concrete examples, poetic examples.

Now, according to Blake, Christ did not work, did not speak in this way in order to express things more vividly, but because he naturally thought in images, in metaphors and parables. For example, he did not say that given all his temptations, it is difficult for a wealthy man to enter Heaven. He said that it would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter Heaven. That is, he used hyperbole. All of this is quite important for Blake.

Blake also believes—and this prefigures a large part of current psychoanalysis—that we should not smother our impulses. He says, for example, that an injured man has the desire to take revenge, that it is natural to want revenge, and that if a man does not take revenge, that desire remains in the depth of his soul, and corrupts him. This is why in his most characteristic work, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*—I think it has been translated into Spanish, I do not remember if by [Rafael] Alberti or Neruda—he has the “Proverbs of Hell,” except that for Blake what common theologians call Hell is really Heaven; for instance, there we read: “*El gusano partido en dos perdoná al arado.*” [“The cut worm forgives the plow.”]¹¹ What else can a worm do? And he also says that it is unfair to have the same law for the lion—who is pure strength, energy—as for the ox. That is, he anticipates Nietzsche’s doctrines, which come much later.

At the end of his life, Blake seems to repent and preaches love and compassion, and mentions Christ’s name more often. This work, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, is strange, for it is written partly in verse and partly in prose. And there is a series of proverbs in which he spells out his philosophy. Then there are other books that are referred to as his “prophetic books,” and these are very difficult to read,

but we suddenly find extraordinarily beautiful passages.¹² There is, for example, a goddess named Oothoon. This goddess is very much in love with a man, and she hunts women to give to the man, she hunts them with steel, and diamond traps. We have these verses: “But nets of steel and traps of diamond will Oothoon spread, and catch for thee girls of mild silver and furious gold.”¹³ That is “*Pero Oothoon tenderá para ti redes de hierro y trampas de diamante, y cazará para ti muchachas de suave plata y de furioso oro.*” Then Blake speaks of fortune, of corporal delights, because for him, those delights were not sins as they are for Christians generally, and for Puritans in particular.

Blake’s oeuvre was forgotten by his contemporaries. De Quincey, in the fourteen volumes of his work, refers only once to him as “that mad printmaker William Blake.” But later, Blake wields a powerful influence over Bernard Shaw. There is one act—the act of John Tanner’s dream in *Man and Superman*, by Bernard Shaw—that is like a dramatic expression of the doctrines of Swedenborg and Blake. Now Blake is considered one of the classic English poets. Moreover, the complexity of his work has lent itself to multiple interpretations. There is a book, which I’ve ordered but have not yet received; it is a dictionary of Blake.¹⁴ That is, a book that deals, in alphabetical order, with all of Blake’s gods and divinities. Some symbolize time, others space, others desire, others moral laws. And attempts have been made to reconcile Blake’s contradictions, for he was not completely a visionary—that is, not completely a poet, not completely a man who thinks through images, which would have made his work easier—he was also a philosopher. So in his work there is a kind of easy coming and going between images—they are usually splendid, like the one I talked about with “girls of mild silver and furious gold”—and long abstract stanzas. Moreover, the music of his verses is sometimes rough, and this is odd because Blake began by

using traditional forms and a very simple, almost infantile language. But then he finally comes to free verse. . . . One finds in Blake an ancient belief of sailors: that a man and a woman can lose their humanity. He also suggests the idea of an old maritime superstition: that the sailor who kills an albatross is thus condemned to eternal penitence. What we see in Blake's beliefs is this concept: that small acts produce terrible consequences. And so he says: "He who tortures a caterpillar sees the terrible and mysterious, descends into a labyrinth of infinite night, and is condemned to infinite torments."

Blake, as a writer, is unique in the English literature of his time. He cannot be fit into romanticism or pseudo-classicism; he escapes, he does not follow trends. Blake is unique in his era—in England and in Europe, as well. And in this regard I would like to recall a probably well-known phrase, which is: "Each Englishman is an island." That can be applied very well to Blake.

CLASS 16

LIFE OF THOMAS CARLYLE. SARTOR RESARTUS BY CARLYLE. CARLYLE, PRECURSOR OF NAXISM. BOLÍVAR'S SOLDIERS, ACCORDING TO CARLYLE

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 23, 1966

Today, we will discuss Carlyle. Carlyle is one of those writers who dazzles the reader. I remember when I discovered him, around 1916, I thought that he was really the only author. The same thing then happened to me with Walt Whitman; it had already happened with Victor Hugo, and it would happen with Quevedo.¹ In other words, I thought that all other writers were wrongheaded simply because they were not Thomas Carlyle. Now, those writers who dazzle you, who seem like the prototype of the writer, tend to end up being overwhelming. They start out by dazzling you, but run the risk of becoming intolerable in the end. The same thing happened to me with the French writer Léon Bloy, with the English poet Swinburne, and with many others throughout my long life.² In all these cases, they were highly personal writers, so personal that one ends up learning the formula for the dazzle, the stupor they provoke.

Let's take a look at some of the facts of Carlyle's life. Carlyle was born in a village in Scotland in the year 1795 and died in London—in Chelsea, where his house has been preserved—in the year 1881. That is, his was a long and industrious life devoted to literature, reading, scholarship, and writing.

Carlyle had humble origins. His parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents were all peasants. And Carlyle was Scottish. It is common to confuse the Scots and the English, but they are, in spite of their political unification, two essentially different peoples. Scotland is a poor country with a bloody history of warring among the many clans. Moreover, the Scots in general tend to be more intellectual than the English. Or better said, the English are usually not intellectual, and almost all the Scots are. This may be because of all the religious controversies, but if it is true that the people of Scotland devoted themselves to discussing theology, it is because they were intellectuals. This often happens with causes that tend to be effects and effects that are confused with causes. In Scotland, religious discussions were common, and it is worth remembering that Edinburgh, like Geneva, was one of the capitals of Calvinism in Europe. The essential aspect of Calvinism is the belief in predestination, based on the Biblical passage “many are called, but few are chosen.”

Carlyle studied at the parish church in his town, then at the University of Edinburgh, and when he was around twenty, he underwent some kind of spiritual crisis or mystical experience that he described in the strangest of his books, *Sartor Resartus*. *Sartor Resartus* in Latin means “The Mended Tailor” or “The Darned Tailor.” We will soon see why he chose this strange title. The fact is that Carlyle had reached a state of melancholy provoked undoubtedly by the neurosis that haunted him his whole life. Carlyle had become an atheist; he did not believe in God. But the melancholy of Calvinism continued to haunt him even when he thought he had left it behind—the idea of a universe without hope, a universe in which the vast majority of its inhabitants are condemned to Hell. And then one night he had a kind of revelation, one that did not free him from this pessimism, from his melancholy, but did lead him to the conviction that man can be saved through work. Carlyle did not believe that any human labor had any lasting value. He

thought that anything aesthetic or intellectual man did was despicable and ephemeral. But at the same time he believed that the fact of working, the fact of doing something, even if that *thing* was despicable, was not despicable. There is a German anthology of his work, which was published during the First World War and titled *Work and Do Not Despair*.³ This is one of the effects of Carlyle's thought.

Once Carlyle decided to devote his life to literature, he began to acquire a vast and miscellaneous culture. For example, he and his wife, Jane Welsh, studied Spanish without teachers, and every day they read one chapter of *Don Quixote* in the original Spanish. There is a passage in Carlyle in which he contrasts the fate of Cervantes and Byron. He considers Byron—a good-looking, athletic aristocrat, a man of fortune, who nevertheless felt inexplicably melancholic. And he considers the hard life of Cervantes—a soldier and a prisoner—who nevertheless wrote a book, not full of complaints but rather full of private and sometimes hidden joys, *Don Quixote*.

Carlyle moves to London—he had already been a schoolteacher and had collaborated on an encyclopedia, the *Edinburgh Encyclopaedia*—and there he contributes to periodicals.⁴ He publishes articles, but we must remember that an article then was what we would today call a book or a monograph. Now an article is usually about five to ten pages long; then, an article was usually more or less one hundred pages long. So, Carlyle's and Macaulay's articles were truly monographs, and some were even two hundred pages long. Today, they would be books.

A friend of Carlyle's recommended that he study German. Because of political circumstances, after the victory at Waterloo, the English and the Prussians became brothers-in-arms, and England was discovering Germany, and discovering after centuries its affinity with other Germanic nations, with Germany, Holland, and of course with the Scandinavian countries. Carlyle studied German, was

excited by Schiller's work, and published—this was his first book—a biography of Schiller written in a correct, and rather ordinary, style.⁵ Then he read a German romantic writer, Johann Paul Richter, a writer we could call soporific, who recounted slow and sometimes languid, mystical dreams.⁶ Richter's style is full of compound words and long clauses, and this style influenced Carlyle's style, except that Richter leaves one with a pleasant impression. On the other hand, Carlyle was an essentially ardent man, so he was a dreary writer. Carlyle also discovered the works of Goethe, who was then unknown outside his own country except in a very fragmentary fashion, and he believed he found his master in Goethe. I say "believed he found" because it is difficult to think of two more different writers: the Olympic—as the Germans call him—and serene Goethe, and Carlyle, tormented as befits a Scot by his ethical preoccupations.

Carlyle was also an infinitely more impetuous and more extravagant writer than Goethe. Goethe began as a romantic, then repented of his initial romanticism and achieved a serenity that we could call "classical." Carlyle wrote about Goethe for magazines in London. This was very moving for Goethe, for although Germany had achieved full intellectual development, politically it was still not unified. (The unification of Germany would take place in 1871, after the Franco-Prussian War.) That is, to the world, Germany was a heterogeneous collection of small principalities, dukedoms, a bit provincial, and for Goethe, that people in England admired him would be like, for a South American, being known in Paris or London.

Then Carlyle published a series of translations of Goethe. He translated both parts of *Wilhelm Meister: Meister's Apprenticeship* and *Wilhelm Meister's Travels*.⁷ He translated other German romantics, including the amazing [E.T.A.] Hoffman. Then he published *Sartor Resartus*.⁸ Then he devoted himself to history, and wrote essays about the famous affair of the diamond necklace—the story of a poor

Frenchman who was made to believe that Marie Antoinette had accepted a gift of his (the essay was taken from Count Cagliostro)—and a wide range of other subjects.⁹ Among these essays, we find one about Dr. Francia, tyrant of Paraguay, an essay that includes—and this is typical of Carlyle—a vindication of Dr. Francia.¹⁰ Then Carlyle writes a book titled *The Letters and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*.¹¹ It is natural that he would admire Cromwell. Cromwell, in the middle of the seventeenth century, made it so that the king of England was tried and condemned to death by Parliament. This scandalized the world, as would, later, the French Revolution, and much later, the Russian Revolution.

Finally, Carlyle settles in London and there publishes *The French Revolution*, his most famous work.¹² Carlyle lent the manuscript to a friend, the author of a famous treatise on logic, [John] Stuart Mill.¹³ Mill's cook used the manuscript to light the stove in the kitchen. Thus, his work of years was destroyed. But Mill convinced Carlyle to accept a monthly stipend while he rewrote his work. This book is one of Carlyle's most vivid; however, it does not have the vividness of reality, but rather the vividness of a visionary book, the vividness of a nightmare. I remember that when I read that chapter where Carlyle describes the flight and capture of Louis XVI, I remembered reading something similar: I was thinking of the famous description of the death of Facundo Quiroga, in one of the final chapters of *Facundo* by Sarmiento.¹⁴ Carlyle describes the king's flight in the chapter "The Night of Spurs." He describes how the king stops at a tavern and a boy recognizes him. He recognizes him because an image of the king is engraved on the back of a coin, and this gives him away. Then they arrest him, and in the end take him to the guillotine.

Carlyle's wife, Jane Welsh, was his social superior, a very intelligent woman whose letters are considered among the best of English correspondence.¹⁵ Carlyle lived for his

work, his lectures, his labors, and this was somewhat prophetic; Carlyle neglected his wife, but after her death, he wrote little of any importance. Before, he had spent fourteen years writing *History of Friedrich II of Prussia, called Frederik the Great*, a difficult book to read.¹⁶ There was a great difference between Carlyle the man, with his religious and pious atheism, and Frederik, who was a skeptical atheist and had no moral scruples. After the death of his wife, Carlyle wrote the history of the first kings of Norway, based on the *Heimskringla* by the Icelandic historian Snorri Sturluson, from the thirteenth century, but this book does not have the passion of his first works.¹⁷

Now we will look at Carlyle's philosophy, or at a few features of this philosophy. In the previous class, I said that for Blake the world was essentially hallucinatory. The world was an hallucination perceived through the five deceptive senses we were given by the inferior God who made this Earth, Jehovah. Now, this corresponds to the philosophy of idealism, and Carlyle was one of the first proponents of German idealism in England. Idealism already existed in England through the work of the Irish bishop Berkeley. But Carlyle preferred to seek it out in the work of Schelling and Kant. For those philosophers, and for Berkeley, idealism has a metaphysical meaning. It tells us that what we *believe* to be reality—let us say, what can be seen, touched, tasted—cannot be reality: it is simply a series of symbols and images that cannot possibly be akin to it. Hence, Kant spoke of the thing in itself that is beyond our perceptions. Carlyle understood all of this perfectly. Carlyle said that just as we see a green tree, we could see it as blue if our visual organs were different, and in the same way, when we touch it we feel it as convex, we could feel it as concave if our hands were made differently. (This is fine, but our eyes and our hands belong to the external world, the world of appearances.) Carlyle takes the basic idea that this world is merely apparent, and gives it a moral meaning and a

political meaning. Swift also said that everything in this world is apparent, that we call, let us say, a miter and a garment with a particular drape a bishop, that we call a wig and a robe a judge, that we call a certain uniform, with a helmet, and epaulettes, a general. Carlyle takes this idea and writes *Sartor Resartus*, or “The Mended Tailor.”

This book is one of the greatest mystifications in the entire history of literature. Carlyle imagines a German philosopher who teaches at the University of Weissnichtwo—at that time, very few people spoke German in England, so he could use these names with impunity.¹⁸ He gave his imaginary philosopher the name Diogenes Teufelsdröckh, that is Diogenes Devil’s Dung—the word “dung” is a euphemism, the word here is stronger—and attributes to him the penning of a huge tome titled *Clothes: Their Origin and Influence*. The subtitle of this work suggests it is a philosophy of clothes. Carlyle then imagines that what we call the universe is really a series of garments, of appearances. And he praises the French Revolution because he sees in it the beginning of an awareness that the world is mere appearances and that one must destroy it. For him, royalty, the Pope, the republic, are all appearances, or used clothing that should be burned, and the French Revolution had started by burning them. So *Sartor Resartus* ends up being the biography of this imaginary German philosopher, and this philosopher is a kind of transfiguration of Carlyle himself. Situating it in Germany, he recounts a mystical experience. He tells the story of an ill-fated love, of a young woman who seems to love him then leaves him, leaving him alone with the night. Then he describes conversations with this imaginary philosopher, and gives long excerpts from a book that never existed called *Sartor, the Tailor*. And, as he is the one giving excerpts from that imaginary book, he calls the work “The Mended Tailor.”

The book is written in a rather obscure style, full of compound words and with a lot of eloquence. If we had to compare Carlyle with a writer in the Spanish language, we

would start close to home with the most impressive pages of Almafuerter.¹⁹ We might also think of Unamuno, who translated *The French Revolution* by Carlyle into Spanish and over whom Carlyle had a strong influence.²⁰ In France, we could think of Léon Bloy.

Now, let us look at Carlyle's concept of history. According to Carlyle, there is sacred scripture, which is only partially the Bible. That scripture is universal history; and that history, says Carlyle, is what we are forced to read constantly, for our fates are part of it. That history is what we are forced to read incessantly and to write, and in which—he adds—we are also inscribed. That is, we are readers of this sacred scripture of letters, words, and verses. Thus, he sees the universe as a book. Now, this book is written by God, but God for Carlyle is not a character. God is in each of us, God writes himself and realizes himself through us. That is, Carlyle turns out to be a pantheist: the only being that exists is God, though God does not exist as an individual being but rather through rocks, through plants, through animals, and through man. And above all, through heroes. Carlyle gave a series of lectures in London titled, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*.²¹ Carlyle says that mankind has always recognized the existence of heroes, that is, of human beings who are superior to them, but that in primitive eras the hero is conceived of as a god; and so his first lecture is titled "The Hero As Divinity," and characteristically he uses the Norse god Odin as an example. He says that Odin was a very brave, a very loyal man, a king who ruled over other kings, and that his contemporaries and immediate successors deified him, considered him a god. Then we have another lecture, "The Hero As Prophet," and Carlyle chooses Mohammed as an example, who until then had only been an object of scorn for Christians in Western Europe. Carlyle says that Mohammed, in the solitude of the desert, was possessed by the idea of solitude and unity with God, and that is how the Koran was written. Then we have

other examples of heroes: the hero as poet—Shakespeare. Then as a man of letters: Johnson and Goethe. And the hero as soldier, and, even though he despised the French, he chooses Napoleon.

Carlyle had absolutely no faith in democracy. Some have even thought of Carlyle—and I understand this fully—as a precursor to Nazism, for he believed in the superiority of the German race. The years 1870 to 1871 saw the Franco-Prussian War. Almost all of Europe—what was intellectual Europe—was on France's side. The famous Swedish writer Strindberg would later write, "France was right, but Prussia had the cannons." This is how all of Europe felt. Carlyle was on Prussia's side. Carlyle believed that the founding of the German Empire would be the beginning of an era of peace in Europe—given what happened later in the world wars we can appreciate the error of his judgment. And Carlyle published two letters in which he said that Count von Bismarck was misunderstood and "the triumph of Germany, that thinks deeply, over the frivolous, vainglorious, and bellicose France," would be a boon for mankind. In the year eighteen sixty-something, the Civil War in the United States began, and everybody in Europe was on the side of the Northern states. This war, as you well know, did not begin as a war of Northern abolitionists—those opposed to slavery—against supporters of slavery and slaveowners in the South. Legally, the Southern states may have been in the right. The Southern states thought they had the right to secede from the Northern states, and they put forth legal arguments. The real issue was that the United States Constitution had not contemplated the possibility that some states would want to secede. The issue was ambiguous, and when Lincoln was elected president, the Southern states decided to separate from the Northern states. The Northern states said that the South did not have the right to secede. Lincoln, in one of his first speeches, said that he was not an abolitionist, but that he thought slavery should not spread beyond the original Southern states, it should not spread, for example, to new

states like Texas or California. But then, as the war grew bloody—the Civil War was the bloodiest war of the nineteenth century—the cause of the North was confounded with the cause of the abolition of slavery.

The cause of the South was confounded with that of the supporters of slavery, and Carlyle, in an article titled “Shooting Niagara,” went over to the Southern side.²² He said that the Negro race was inferior, that the only destiny possible for the Negro was slavery, and that he was on the side of the Southern states. He added a sophistic argument that is typical of his sense of humor—because in the middle of his prophetic tone, Carlyle could also be a humorist; he said that he did not understand those who fought against slavery, that he did not understand what possible advantage there could be in continually changing servants. He thought it much more convenient for the servants to be for life. Which could be more convenient for the masters, but perhaps not for the servants.

In the end, Carlyle condemned democracy. That is why, throughout his entire oeuvre, Carlyle admires dictators, those he called “strong men.” The term is still used today. That is why he wrote a eulogy for William the Conqueror, he wrote three volumes of eulogy to the dictator Cromwell; he praised Dr. Francia, Napoleon, and Frederick the Great of Prussia. And as for democracy, he said that it was nothing but “despair of finding strong men,” and that only strong men could save society. He defined democracy with a memorable phrase like “the chaos that comes with voting.” He wrote about the state of affairs in England. He traveled all over England, paid a lot of attention to the problems of poverty, and the workers—he was from a peasant background. And he said that in every city in England he saw chaos, he saw disorder, he saw the absurdity of democracy, but at the same time there were some things that comforted him, that helped him not lose all hope. And these spectacles were the barracks—there is order in

barracks, at least—and prisons. These were the two things capable of making Carlyle's spirit rejoice.

We have, then, in everything I've said, a kind of manifesto of Nazism and fascism, conceived before the year 1870. More particularly, Nazism, for Carlyle believed in the superiority of the various Germanic nations—the superiority of England, Germany, Holland, and the various Scandinavian countries. This did not prevent Carlyle from being one of Dante's greatest admirers in England. His brother published an admirable, literal translation (in English prose) of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.²³ And naturally Carlyle admired the Greek and Roman conquerors, the Vandals, and Caesar.

As for Christianity, Carlyle believed it was already disappearing, that it already had no future. And as far as history, he saw salvation in strong men. He thought that strong men can be—as Nietzsche said later; in a way Nietzsche would be his disciple—that strong men are beyond good and evil. This is what Blake said before: that having the same law for the lion and the ox was an injustice.

I don't know which of Carlyle's books to recommend to you. I think that if you know English, the best book would be *Sartor Resartus*. Or, if you are interested—if you are less interested in his style and more in his ideas—read the lectures he collected under the title *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*. As for his more extensive work, on which he spent fourteen years, his *History of Friedrich II of Prussia* is a book that has brilliant descriptions of battles. Carlyle's battles came out very well, always. But in the long run it is evident that the author feels himself to be quite distant from the hero. The hero was an atheist, and a friend of Voltaire's. Carlyle was not interested in him.

Carlyle's life was sad. He ended up turning his friends into enemies. He preached in favor of dictatorship, and he was dictatorial in his conversation. He tolerated no contradictions. His best friends distanced themselves from him. His wife died tragically: she was driving in her carriage through Hyde Park when she dropped dead of a heart attack.

Afterward, Carlyle felt regret at being a little responsible for her death, for he paid no attention to her. I think Carlyle came to feel, as our Almafuerte felt, that personal happiness was denied to him, that his own neurosis destroyed any hope of being personally happy.²⁴ And that is why he sought happiness in his work.

I forgot to say—a merely curious detail—that in one of the first chapters of *Sartor Resartus*, when speaking about garments, Carlyle says that the simplest garment he knows of was used by the cavalry of Bolivar in the South American war. And here we have a description of the poncho as “a blanket with a hole in the middle,” under which he imagines Bolivar’s cavalry soldier, he imagines him—simplifying it a bit—“mother naked,” as naked as when he came out of his mother’s belly, covered by the poncho, with only his sword and his spear.”²⁵

CLASS 17

THE VICTORIAN ERA. THE LIFE OF CHARLES DICKENS. THE
NOVELS OF CHARLES DICKENS. WILLIAM WILKIE COLLINS.
THE MYSTERY OF EDWIN DROOD, BY DICKENS.
NOVEMBER 25, 1966

When we look at the history of French literature, we see that it can be studied by using the sources that fed it as points of reference. But this method of study is not applicable to England; it does not fit the English character. As I have said before, "Every Englishman is an island." Englishmen are especially individualistic.

The history of literature that we are doing—and that most people do—resorts to a method of convenience, and that is the division of literary history into eras: dividing writers up into eras. And this can be applied to England. So, we will now see that one of the most remarkable periods in the history of England is the Victorian era. But such a characterization has the inconvenience of being too long: it lasts from 1837 to 1900, a long reign. And, moreover, we would find that defining it is difficult and risky. We would have difficulty, for example, fitting in Carlyle, an atheist who believed in neither heaven nor hell. It appears to be a conservative era, but it saw the rise of the Socialist movement. It is also the time of the great debates between science and religion, between those who affirmed the truth of the Bible and those who followed Darwin. (We should note, however, that the Bible contains great visions of the present.) The Victorian era was characterized by a great reserve regarding anything related to the sensual or the sexual. And yet Sir Richard Burton translated the Arabic book *The Perfumed Garden*, and he put his whole soul into

that work.¹ (It is also around this time, in 1855, that Walt Whitman writes his *Leaves of Grass*.) It is the height of the British Empire. Yet, in spite of all this, several writers wrote and acted without any partisanship: Chesterton, Stevenson, etcetera. The Victorian era was a time of debates and discussion. It did not have a markedly Protestant tendency; there is, for example, a strong movement, born in Oxford, that leans toward Catholicism. So the meeting of all these contrasting elements makes it difficult to define; but still it exists. All these elements are united by a common but changing atmosphere lasting seventy-odd years.

It is within this framework that we find Charles Dickens. He is born in 1812 and dies in 1870. He is a man who comes from the lower middle classes. His father was a clerk and was in debtors' prison many times. Dickens was an engaged writer who devoted a large part of his life's work to fighting for reform, yet we cannot say that Dickens achieved his goal. And this perhaps explains why the reformer aspect of Dickens has been so lost to us. He also lived with the fear that a creditor would send him to debtors' prison, and he advocated for the reform of schools, prisons, labor systems. But if a reform fails, the reformer's work seems to have less value. If it is successful, it no longer seems relevant. For example, the idea that an individual must live his own life, which now seems like a cliché, was at one time a revolutionary idea. This can be seen in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*.

Now, the problem with socially engaged literature is that it is never completely accepted. In the case of Dickens, the social part of his work is obvious. He was a revolutionary. He had a very difficult childhood, and to find out about it, we must read *David Copperfield*, where he also portrays his own father. Dickens [Senior] is a man who lives on the verge of ruin, a lifelong debtor with extravagant optimism about the future. Dickens's mother was a good woman, but her behavior was rather confused and excessive. Dickens had to work in a factory when he was a child. Then he was a

journalist and a stenographer. He recorded the debates of the House of Commons, but much more realistically than Johnson—we've already seen how *he* did it.

Dickens lived in London. In his book *A Tale of Two Cities*, based on the French Revolution, we see that he really could not write a tale of two cities. He was a resident of just one city: London.

He began in journalism and came to the novel from there. And he remained faithful to the style he developed, throughout his life. His novels were published in installments, in serial form, and his work resonated so much that his readers followed the destinies of his characters as if they were real. For example, one time he received hundreds of letters asking him not to let the protagonist of a novel die.

Now, Dickens was not very interested in plot but rather in character, in his characters' personalities. The plot is almost a mere mechanical means through which the action advances. There is no real development in his characters. It is the environment, the events, that change them, as is the case in reality.² The characters Dickens creates live in the perpetual rapture of being themselves. He often distinguishes them through dialects; for some he employs a special dialect. This can be seen in the original English.

But Dickens suffers from an excess of sentimentalism. He does not remain outside his work when he writes. He identifies with each and every character. His first book that achieved a large readership was *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*, published in installments.³ At first they suggested he use certain illustrations, and Dickens adjusted the text to fit them. And as he kept writing the book, he kept imagining new characters, becoming intimate with them. His characters soon began taking on a life of their own. This is what happens with Mr. Pickwick, who takes on a singular relevance and is a gentleman with a solid character, and the same thing happens with the other characters. The servant

sees certain ridiculous things about his master, but he is very fond of him.

Dickens read very little, but one of the first books he did read was the translation of *A Thousand and One Nights*; also, the English novelists who were influenced by Cervantes—the road novels—in which characters traveling around create the action; adventure jumps out to meet the characters.⁴ Pickwick loses a court case, but he believes it to be unfair and refuses to pay damages, so must spend time in jail.

His servant, Sam Weller, incurs debts he does not pay so he can accompany him in jail. Dickens's penchant for extravagant names is worth noting: Pickwick, Twist, Chuzzlewit, Copperfield. One could list many more. He ended up making a fortune from literature, and achieving fame. His only rival was Thackeray. But it is said that even Thackeray's daughter once asked him, "Papa, why don't you write books like Mr. Dickens?" Thackeray was a cynic, though there are sentimental moments in his works. Dickens was incapable of portraying a gentleman, but they appear in his work. He was intimate with the lower classes and the bourgeoisie, but not the members of the aristocracy, who rarely figure in his work. Thackeray portrays them because he knew them well; Dickens, because he felt plebian. We should keep these different circumstances in mind: they set the two writers apart.

Dickens traveled around England giving public readings of his work. He would choose dramatic chapters. For example, the scene of Pickwick's trial. He used a different voice for each of the characters, and he did so with extraordinary dramatic talent. The audience applauded heartily. It is said that he would take out his watch, see that he had an hour and a quarter; delays for applause meant the audience would miss part of the reading. He attempted to repeat this English experience in the United States, but there he was not well received. First, because he declared that he was an abolitionist, and second, because he

defended the rights of the author. He felt victimized, offended, considered it outrageous that North American publishers were growing rich printing short excerpts of his work. The North Americans thought, on the contrary, that he was wrong to protest this system. So, when he returned to England he published *American Notes*; he seemed not to realize that England was peopled by ridiculous characters, whereas the North Americans were a new nation. He attacked them bitterly. As I said, Dickens enjoyed enormous popularity and grew rich from his work, and he traveled to France, to Italy, but without trying to understand those countries. He was always looking for humorous episodes to recount. He died in 1870. He was not at all interested in literary theory. He was a brilliant man, interested mostly in pursuing his work.

The structure of his novels divides his characters into the good and the bad, the absurd and the lovable. He wished to do something like a Final Judgment in his work, hence many of his endings are artificial, because the bad are punished and the good are rewarded.

There are two features worth pointing out. Dickens discovered two things that were important for subsequent literature: childhood, with its solitude, its fears. (The truth is, we do not know for certain about his childhood.) When Unamuno speaks about his mother, we are amazed.⁵ And Groussac said that it is absurd to devote chapters to childhood—the emptiest age—and not to spend more time on youth and adulthood.⁶ Dickens is the first novelist who gave importance to his characters' childhoods. Dickens also discovered the city as a landscape. Landscapes were always the countryside, mountains, jungles, rivers. But Dickens writes about London. He is one of the first to find poetry in sordid, impoverished places.

Second, we should point out that he was interested in the melodramatic and tragic side of life, along with the caricatured. We know from biographies that this had an

influence on Dostoyevsky, on his unforgettable murders. In the novel *Martin Chuzzlewit*, two characters take a trip in a kind of stagecoach, and one is somehow under the other's control.⁷ Chuzzlewit has made the decision to kill his companion. The coach turns over. Chuzzlewit does everything possible to make the horses kill him, but his companion is saved. When they reach the inn, Chuzzlewit closes the door [to his room and falls asleep], but he dreams that he did kill him. He walks through a forest and when he emerges, he is alone, without regrets: but he is afraid that the [ghost of the] murdered man will be waiting for him when he reaches home. Dickens describes Chuzzlewit emerging alone from the forest. He has no regrets about what he has done, but he has fear, an absurd fear, that when he reaches home, the man he murdered will be waiting for him.

Then, in *Oliver Twist*, we have a poor girl, Nancy, who is strangled by Bill Sikes, a ruffian. We have the pursuit of Bill Sikes. Bill Sikes has a dog who loves him very much, and Bill kills it because he is afraid he will be found because the dog is with him. Dickens was very good friends with Wilkie Collins. I don't know if any of you have read *The Moonstone* or *The Woman in White*.⁸ Eliot says his are the longest detective novels, and the best. (Dickens collaborated with Wilkie Collins on a play that was staged at Dickens's house. And Eliot says that Dickens—because he was an excellent actor—must have given the roles much more individuality than they had in the work.) Wilkie Collins was a master in the art of weaving complicated, but never confusing, storylines. That is, his plots have many threads, but the reader holds them in his hand. On the contrary, Dickens, in all his novels, arbitrarily wove the storylines together. Andrew Lang said that if he had to recount the plot of *Oliver Twist* and they were threatening him with the death penalty, he, who so admired *Oliver Twist*, would certainly be hung.⁹

In his last novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, Dickens set out to write a well-constructed detective novel, like his friend Wilkie Collins, the master of the genre.¹⁰ The novel was left incomplete. But for the first installment—because Dickens was always loyal to the system of serializing his work; Dickens usually published his novels in one volume after they had appeared in installments—he gave a series of instructions to his illustrator. And we see in one of the illustrations one of the characters in a chapter Dickens did not manage to write, and that character does not have a shadow. Some have conjectured that he has no shadow because he is a ghost. In the first chapter, one of the characters smokes opium and has visions, so maybe these visions are being portrayed.

Chesterton says that God was generous to Dickens, for he gave him the dramatic end. In none of Dickens's novels, Chesterton says, does the plot matter: what mattered were his characters, with their phobias, their clothes that were always the same, and their special vocabulary. But finally Dickens decides to write a novel with an important plot, and at almost the very moment when Dickens is about to announce the murderer, God orders his death, and so—Chesterton says—we will never know the real secret, the hidden plot of *Edwin Drood*, until we meet Dickens in heaven. And then—says Chesterton—most likely Dickens will no longer remember and will be as perplexed as we are.¹¹

In conclusion, I would like to tell you that Dickens is one of the great benefactors of humanity. Not because of the reforms he advocated without any success but rather because he created a series of characters. One can now pick up any of Dickens's novels, open it to any page, and be certain to keep reading it and enjoying it.

Perhaps the best novel to read to become familiar with Dickens—the kind of familiarity that can be worth so much in our lives—is his autobiographical novel, *David Copperfield*, which contains so many scenes from Dickens's

childhood. Then, *The Pickwick Papers*. And then, I would say, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, with its deliberately unfair descriptions of America and the murder of Jonas Chuzzlewit. But the truth is that once one has read some of Dickens's pages, once one has resigned oneself to some of his bad habits, to his sentimentalism, to his melodramatic characters, one has found a friend for life.

CLASS 18

THE LIFE OF ROBERT BROWNING. THE OBSCURITY OF HIS WORK. HIS POEMS.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 28, 1966

Today we will talk about England's most obscure poet, Robert Browning. This surname belongs to a group of surnames that, although they seem to be English, are of Saxon origin. Robert Browning was the son of an Englishman, but his grandmother was Scottish, and his grandfather—one of them—was German of Jewish origin. He was what we would today call a typical Englishman because of his mixed blood. As for his family and its social standing, they had a good position; they belonged to the upper class. That is, Browning was born in an aristocratic neighborhood—but one in which there were also boardinghouses.

Browning is born in 1812, the same year as Dickens, but the parallels end there. Their lives, and they themselves, are very different. Robert Browning was educated, more than anywhere else, in his father's library. As a result, he had vast cultural knowledge, for everything interested him and he read everything, especially about Jewish culture. He also knew languages—Greek, for example. Practicing them and translating was his spiritual refuge for many years, especially during the final years of his life.

His life as a wealthy man who knew from the beginning that he was destined for poetry was, nevertheless, a dramatic one. So much so that it was later brought to the stage and then the movie screen. That is to say, it is a life

that arouses interest because of its plot. The woman who would be his wife, Elizabeth Barrett, suffered a terrible fall when she was young, which damaged her spine.¹ From that time on, she lived at home, surrounded by doctors, and people who whispered, who spoke in low voices. She was dominated by her father, who thought that his daughter's duty was to resign herself to being an invalid. So as to prevent anybody from upsetting her, she was absolutely prohibited from receiving visitors. Elizabeth, however, had a poetic vocation. She finally published a book, *Sonnets from Portuguese*, that strongly attracted the interest of Robert Browning.² Miss Barrett's book was undoubtedly the book of a passionate woman. So Browning wrote to her, and they established an epistolary relationship. The letters are difficult to understand, written in a dialect they shared, of their own making, constructed out of allusions to Greek poets. Until finally Browning proposed that he visit her. She reacted with great alarm. She told him it was impossible, that the doctors had forbidden her from any agitation that might be caused by a visit from a stranger. They fell in love, and he proposed to her. She then took the most decisive step of her life: she agreed to go out for a ride with him behind her father's back. It had been years since she had left her house. She was amazed. She got out of the carriage, walked a few steps, and saw that the cold afternoon air did her no harm. She touched a tree, in silence. And she told Browning that she would run away with him, and they would marry secretly.

A few days after they were married, they ran off to Italy. Her father never forgave her, not even when her illness worsened. He played his hand, as he always had, and never forgave what he considered to be a betrayal. Robert and Elizabeth settled in Italy. It was the period of the national liberation movement. The Brownings' house was under constant surveillance. Browning felt an intense love for Italy, as did many of his contemporaries. He was interested in the

struggle of one country against another for its freedom, and so he was interested in Italy's struggle against Austria. He managed to bring about such an improvement in his wife's health that she was able to climb mountains with him. They did not have children, but they were very happy.³ Until, at last, she dies, and then Browning writes his major work: *The Ring and the Book*. He finally returns to London and devotes himself to literature. He is already a famous author, but he is considered obscure—as Góngora and others were. In London, a "Browning Society" was even founded that was dedicated to interpreting his poems. Today, for every one of his poems, there are two or more explanations. In an encyclopedia, you can look for the titles of Browning's poems and find one or several explanations that have been given. . . . So, at the meetings of this society, the members sometimes read controversial articles, each of which offered an interpretation of a poem, and Browning often attended these meetings. He would go, drink a cup of tea, listen to the interpretations, then he would thank them and say that they had given him much to think about. But he never committed himself to any one in particular.

It is remarkable that Browning was such a good friend of Tennyson, who boasted that his entire oeuvre had a Virgilian clarity. Nevertheless, the two were friends and neither accepted that anybody else would speak badly of the other. Robert Browning continued to publish books, among which was a translation of Euripides. He knew Latin, German, Greek, and Old English. Browning dies in 1889, wrapped in a kind of strange glory. After the death of his wife, he had another love, but this was never reliably proven. Elizabeth was not just a poet, she was also interested in Italian politics. Browning's obscurity is not a verbal one. There is not a single line in his poems that is incomprehensible. But the overall interpretation of his poems is obscure, and some have been declared impossible to understand. It is a psychological difficulty. Oscar Wilde said of the work of novelist George Meredith that he was

Browning in prose.⁴ According to him, Browning used verse as a means to write prose.⁵

Browning had an almost fatal facility with writing verse. He abounded in rhymes that Valle Inclán then continued to use in his book *La Pipa de Kif*; his poems were written exclusively with rhymes of this kind.⁶ If Browning had chosen prose rather than poetry, he would have been one of the great short-story writers in the English language. But during that era, poetry was given the greatest importance, and Browning's verses particularly stand out for their musical qualities. Browning was also interested in studies of casuistry, a branch of philosophy that deals with ethics. He was interested in contradictory and complex characters. So he invented a form of first-person lyrical-dramatic poetry in which it is not the author but rather a character who is speaking. This has a distant precedent in "Deor's Lament."⁷

Now, let us look at the poems. Let us look at one of his less well-known, but most characteristic ones, "Fears and Scruples." The poem is two pages long, is not obscure, but like all of Browning's poems it has the virtue of not being at all like any of his other poems. The protagonist, the "I" of the poem, is an unknown man. We are not told his name or what era he lived in. This man counts on—or thinks he can count on—a famous friend whom he has seen on only a few occasions. The friend has looked at him and smiled. The friend has performed great deeds, he is famous throughout the world, and the two of them have maintained a correspondence. The poor man finally says that his great deeds have not been attributed to his illustrious friend. He has brought the letters he received to be analyzed by handwriting experts, and they have told him they are apocryphal. But he ends up saying that he believes in these letters, in their authenticity and in the great deeds, and that his whole life has been enriched by this friendship. The others reject this, they try to destroy his faith. And in the

end, there appears the question: “What if this friend happen to be—God?” And so the poem ends up being a parable about the man who prays and doesn’t know if his prayer falls into a vacuum or is heard by somebody, by a distant listener. What is that friend who is God?

Let us now look at another poem. This one is “My Last Duchess,” in which the speaker is the Duke of Ferrara from the Renaissance.⁸ He is speaking to an emissary of another aristocrat, who has come to arrange the marriage of the duke, who is a widower, to the aristocrat’s daughter. The duke ushers his guest into one of the rooms, where he shows him a curtain and says, “That curtain is usually not open.” Here we see the duke’s jealous nature, because behind the curtain is a portrait of his first wife. The guest is finally able to admire the splendid painting. The duke then speaks about his wife’s smile. He says that she smiled at everybody, that she smiled easily, perhaps too easily. She was very beautiful, but “paint cannot exactly reproduce her cheeks.” She was very beautiful and “*su corazón se alegraba fácilmente*” [“her heart ... too soon made glad”]. They loved each other; he loved her and she loved him. But seeing her so happy made him suspicious that in his absence, she kept being happy, she kept smiling. So then he gave the command, and “*todas sus sonrisas cesaron.*” [“Then all smiles stopped together.”] We understand from this that the duke had his wife poisoned.... Then they descend the staircase to eat, and the duke shows his guest a statue. Previously a dowry was spoken of, but that causes no concern because the duke trusts the aristocrat’s generosity. He also trusts that his future wife will know how to be the Duchess of Ferrara, an honor she accepts—we don’t know if as a duty, or because she does not realize what it means. The general purpose of the poem is to show the duke’s character, just as he is presented.

“How It Strikes a Contemporary” is the title of an unusual poem that takes place in Valladolid.⁹ The

protagonist could be, perhaps, Cervantes, or some other famous Spanish writer. The “I” of the poem is a bourgeois gentleman, who says that he has known only one poet his whole life, that he can give an approximate description of him, though he is not at all certain that he was a poet. And he describes him, saying that he was a man who dressed modestly, but with dignity, whom everybody knew. The suit he wore was threadbare at the elbows and along the hems of the pants. His cape had once been elegant. He walked around the city followed by his dog, and as he walked, he cast a tall, black shadow onto the sun-filled streets. He did not look at anybody, but everybody seemed to look at him. And although he didn’t look at anybody, he seemed to notice everything. Word spread in the city that it was this man who really ruled the city, not the governor. In this we are reminded of Victor Hugo’s comment that even though he was in exile, he considered himself “a sort of witness of God” and the “sleepwalker of the sea.” It’s remarkable that Shakespeare also speaks of “God’s spies.”^{[10](#)}

It was said [of this man] that every night he sent letters to the king—here we should think of the word “king” as the same as “God”—and that his house was sumptuously furnished, and he was served by naked slave girls, and great tapestries by Titian hung on the walls. But the gentleman followed him once and found out that this was untrue: the man sat in a doorway, his legs crossed over his dog. The house was new, recently painted, and he ate at a table with his maid. Then he played cribbage, and before midnight, he went to bed. He then imagines him dying, and then imagines a host of angels surrounding him and taking him to God for his service or vocation of observing men. The gentleman concludes by saying, “I could never write a verse, let’s go have fun.”^{[11](#)}

Another poem is “Karshish,” narrated by an Arab doctor.^{[12](#)} It is a long poem, written by the doctor to his master, and takes place in an era before Islam. He says the

master knows everything, that he simply collects the crumbs that fall from all that wisdom.

The first part of the poem is purely professional; it shows Browning's interest in medicine. The essence of the poem is a case of catalepsy. Before that, the narrator tells of his strange experiences: he was attacked by brigands and wounded; he had to use a pumice stone, medicinal herbs, snake skin. As I said, the essence of the poem is a case of catalepsy induced in order to work a cure.

He is taken to a village. There a sick man was cured by a doctor who put him into a death-like state. Even his heart stopped beating; and then the doctor went to see the sick man, who told him that he had been dead and then resuscitated. The doctor tried to talk to him, but the other heard nothing, cared about nothing—or rather he cared about everything. Then the narrator wanted to meet the doctor, and they told him that this doctor had been killed in a riot, and others told him he had been executed. Then he returns to greet the master, and the poem ends. The resuscitated man is Lazarus; the dead doctor is Christ. All this is simply touched on by the poet in passing.

An analogous poem is the one in which a “tyrant of Syracuse” appears.¹³ A universal artist receives a letter from the tyrant, and this artist happens to live in a later era. His poems are perfect, like those of Homer, only he has arrived after Homer. He has written about philosophy. The poet-philosopher did not understand how man could return to a state of ignorance. And the tyrant wants to know if there is any hope for man's immortality. The philosopher, who has read the Platonic dialogues, who talks about Socrates, says there is a sect that claims there is, that claims God has been embodied in a man. And the philosopher says that the sect is wrong. The philosopher and the tyrant have come close to the Christian truth, but neither sees it or realizes it. We can find a similar story in Anatole France.

CLASS 19

ROBERT BROWNING'S POEMS. A CHAT WITH ALFONSO REYES. *THE RING AND THE BOOK*.

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 30, 1966

We will now continue our discussion of the work of Robert Browning. I recall that they once asked him the meaning of one of his poems, and he answered: "I wrote it long ago. When I wrote it, only God and I knew what it meant; now, only God knows," in order to avoid answering.

I spoke about some of his minor poems, and there is a poem I would like to recommend to you, but I cannot explain it, not even vaguely. It is perhaps the strangest of all, and it is called "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came."¹ "Childe" does not mean "child" here. It is an ancient title for the nobility and is written with a final "e." The line is taken from Shakespeare; it is also the name of a ballad that has been lost.² And it is perhaps the strangest of all of Browning's poems. The great American poet Carl Sandburg has written a poem titled "Manitoba Childe Roland."³ It tells how he read that poem to a boy on a farm in Minnesota, and how the child did not understand anything—perhaps the person reading also did not really understand it—but how both of them were carried away, fascinated by the mystery of the poem that has never been explained.⁴ It is full of magical details. It apparently takes place in the Middle Ages. Not in an historic Middle Ages, but rather the Middle Ages of books about knights errant, of the books in Don Quixote's library.

And now, before talking about *The Ring and the Book*, I would like to mention, a bit randomly, a few other poems by Browning. There is one titled “Mr. Sludge, the Medium.”⁵ The protagonist of this poem is a medium, a fake medium who takes a lot of money from an American millionaire who is in despair over the recent death of his wife. Mr. Sludge has put the widower in communication with the spirit of the dead woman. And then he is found out, by the American millionaire himself, and he says he is going to report him to the police as an imposter, but finally he says that he will not on the condition that Mr. Sludge, the fake medium, tell him the true story of his career, a career built on deception. And the other says that he heard about spiritualism and thought that he could take advantage of it, for it is not difficult to deceive people who want to be deceived. That, in fact, those who have been deceived by him—not excluding the angry gentleman who is threatening him—have been his accomplices, have closed their eyes when confronting clumsy lies. He tells about how at first he showed his victims texts he said were written in Homer’s handwriting, and as he did not know the Greek alphabet, the Greek words were represented with circles and dots “*antes que encontrara el libro útil que sabe*” [“before I found the useful book that knows”]. Then he grows more confident and in some way exalts in himself and then, suddenly, he becomes desolate. Then he tries to recover his victim’s trust. He asks him if he hears at that moment the voice of his beloved wife, of that woman he himself has learned to love through the man’s love of her, and through the dialogue with her spirit. The other then threatens him with physical violence. Mr. Sludge continues confessing the truth and then we reach the end of the poem. It is a long poem, because Browning had studied the subject very well, the subject of fake mediums. And then we come to the end, to a conclusion that is wholly unexpected by the reader and for those who have been following the story of Mr. Sludge’s deceptions and the way he worked them. In the end, the medium, whom the other is

on the verge of attacking, of physically assaulting, says that everything he has told him *has been* the truth, that he has not been deceiving him. That he was carrying the dead woman's letters hidden in the sleeves of his jacket. "Nevertheless," he adds, in spite of all his tricks, "I do believe there is something in spiritualism, I do believe in the other world." That is, the protagonist admits that he has been an imposter, but that does not mean that there is no other world, that there are no spirits. One can see how Browning liked ambiguous situations and souls. For example, in this case, the imposter is also a believer.

There is a short poem titled "Memorabilia," "things worth remembering" in Latin.⁶ I think the title is taken from some interspersed scenes in the work of the great Swedish mystic Swedenborg. It is about two gentlemen who are conversing, and it turns out that one of them met the well-known atheist poet Shelley, that poet who had so much influence on young people. And the other says to him, "What, did you talk to Shelley? Did you see him, he talked to you, and you answered him? How strange that all is, and yet it is true!" And he says, once he had to cross a moor, a moor that had a name and undoubtedly had some use, some purpose, some destiny in the world. But he has forgotten everything. Everything else—all the blank miles—have been erased. What he remembers is an eagle feather. There, he saw and picked up and placed in his breast the eagle feather—and he has forgotten everything else. This is what happens in life. He has forgotten, but he does remember his encounter with Shelley.⁷

This year, I met Alfonso Reyes.⁸ He spoke to me about the great Mexican poet Othón, and he said to me, "What? You know Othón?"⁹ And then Reyes immediately remembered Browning's poem and repeated the first stanza:

Ah, did you once see Shelley plain,
And did he stop and speak to you?

And did you speak to him again?
How strange it seems, and new!

And then, at the end:

A moulted feather, an eagle-feather—
Well, I forget the rest.

And there is another poem about a man who is dying, and a minister comes, a Protestant minister, who tells him that the world is a vale of tears.¹⁰ And the man says to him: “Do I see the world as a valley of tears? No, reverend Sir, not I,” “*¿Veó yo acaso el mundo como un valle de lágrimas? No, reverendo señor, no yo.*” And then he, who is disfigured and dying, tells the minister that what he remembers of the world has nothing to do with a vale of tears. That what he remembers is a house, a country house where there lived a woman, probably a servant with whom he had a love affair. And to describe the topography of the house, he makes use of the medicine bottles on his bedside table. And he says, “That curtain there is green or blue for a healthy person, but it reminds *me* of the blinds of the house, how they were, and the lane along the side, because I, scurrying along it, could reach a door, and there she would be, waiting for me.” “I know,” he says, “that all this is improper,” “that it is all indecent, but I am dying.”¹¹ And then he says that he remembers these illicit loves with the servant. That is the only thing he remembers, the only thing life has left him at those final moments, and what he remembers at the end, without any remorse.

There’s another poem whose protagonist is Caliban.¹² Browning had read a book about the sources Shakespeare used, about the Patagonian gods—a god named Setebos. And Browning uses this information about the religion of the

Patagonian Indians as the basis for his poem titled “Caliban upon Setebos.”

There’s another poem, “Love Among the Ruins,” and this takes place in the countryside of Rome.¹³ There is a man—we can assume a shepherd—who speaks about the ruins and describes the splendor of a city that once existed there. He speaks of the kings, of the thousands of horsemen, the palaces, the banquets, a subject similar to the Anglo-Saxon elegy called “The Ruin.” And then he says that he often met a girl there, and that this girl would wait for him, and that he would see the love in her eye before he approached and embraced her. He ends by saying that of everything in the world, love is best, love is enough for him, what does he care about kings and empires that have disappeared? Because Browning has—and I have not spoken enough about this—many poems about love, physical love as well. And it is this theme of love that is the subject of the book we will discuss today, before we speak about Dante Gabriel Rossetti—who founded the group the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and that comes after Browning’s time. But Browning’s major work, a book written with a very strange technique, is *The Ring and the Book*.

I don’t know if any of you have seen the admirable Japanese film that came out many years ago called *Rashomon*.¹⁴ Akutagawa, who wrote the story on which the film was based, was Browning’s first Japanese translator.¹⁵ The technique used in the story (and in the film) is taken from Browning’s *The Ring and the Book*. *The Ring and the Book* is much more complex than the film. Which is understandable, because a book can be much more complex than a film. In the film, we have the story of a samurai who goes through the jungle with his wife. They are attacked by a bandit. The bandit kills the woman, and then we have three different versions of the same event. One is told by the samurai, the other by the bandit, and the other by the spirit of the woman through the mouth of a witch. And the three

stories are different. They do, however, all refer to the same event. Now, Browning attempted something similar, but much more difficult, because Browning was interested in seeking the truth. Let's begin with the title of the book: *The Ring and the Book*. This can be explained in the following way: Browning begins by saying that to make a ring—and the ring becomes a metaphor for the book that he is about to write, that he has already begun to write—it is necessary to use a metal alloy. The ring cannot be made of pure gold, one must mix the gold with other, baser, metals. And for him to make this book, *The Ring and the Book*, he has had to add to the gold—this humility is also typical of Browning—baser metals, the metals of his own imagination. As for the pure metal, he has found it. He found it, but he has had to extract it from a book that he found at a stand in Florence, and that book is the story of a criminal trial that took place one century earlier in Rome.

That book was translated into English, published by Everyman's Library, and you would know it under the title *The Old Yellow Book*.¹⁶ This book contains the entire story of a criminal trial, which is sordid, and a rather horrible story. It is about a count who married a peasant woman believing she was wealthy. Then he repudiates her and locks her up in a convent. She manages to escape from the convent to go live at the home of her parents. Then the count appears, because he suspects her of being an adulteress, of having had a love affair with a priest. The count is accompanied by several murderers; they enter the house and kill her. Then he is arrested, and the book records the declarations of the murderer and some letters. Browning read and reread the book, and learned all the details of this sordid story. Finally, the count is sentenced to death for the murder of his wife. And then Browning decided to discover the truth and wrote *The Ring and the Book*.

And in *The Ring and the Book*, the story is repeated I think ten times, the same story. And what is curious, what is original, is that the story—as opposed to what happens in

Rashomon—as far as the facts, is the same. The reader of the book learns them perfectly. The difference is in the point of view of each character.¹⁷ It is possible that Browning was inspired by the epistolary novels that were in fashion in the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries. I think that *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, by Goethe, belongs to this genre.¹⁸ And he was also inspired by the novels of Wilkie Collins. Collins, in order to lighten up the long narrative of his detective plots, would pass the story around from character to character. And this worked for satirical purposes. For example, we have a chapter narrated by one of the characters. That character tells how he had just conversed with So-and-so, who had impressed him greatly with the wit and depth of his conversation. And then we go to the next chapter, narrated by his interlocutor, and in that chapter we see that he has just spoken with the narrator of the previous chapter, and that the other bored him to death with his imbecilities. That is, there is a game of contrast and satire.

Now, Browning takes this method of having several people tell the story, but he does not do it in succession. That is, one character does not pass on the story to another. Each character tells the whole story, the same story, from beginning to end. And Browning dedicates the first part to Elizabeth Barrett, who had died. And at the end he says, "*Oh, lírico amor, mitad ángel, mitad pájaro, toda una maravilla y un incontenible deseo.*" And he says how sometimes he has looked at the sky and he seems to have seen a place where the blue of the sky is more blue, more passionate, and he thought that she might be there. I remember those first lines. "Ah, lyric Love, half angel, half bird, and all a wonder, and a wild desire." And then we have the first canto of the poem, titled "Half-Rome." And there we have the facts, the facts told by a random individual who saw Pompilia—Pompilia is the murdered woman—and was impressed by her beauty and is certain of the guilt of the

murderer, of the injustice of her murder. Then we have another chapter that is called "Half-Rome" also. There, the same story is told by a gentleman, a gentleman of a certain age, who is telling it to his nephew. And he tells him that the count, by killing his wife, has acted justly. He is on the count's side, the side of the murderer. Then we have "Tertium Quid," and this character tells the story with what he believes is impartiality: that the woman is partially right, and the killer also is partially right. He tells the story halfheartedly.

We then have the defense of the priest. Then we have the defense of the count. And then we have what the prosecutor and the defense attorney say. The prosecutor and the defense attorney use legal jargon, and it is as if they were not even talking about the story: they are continually held up by legal issues. That is, they speak, we can say, from *outside* the story.

Then there is something that could be what the woman would have said. And at the end, we have a kind of monologue by the count, who has been sentenced to death. Here the count abandons all subterfuge, all lies, and he tells the truth. He tells how he has been tortured by jealousy, and how his wife deceived him, how she took part in the first deception of him. When he married her, he believed that he was marrying a woman with money. They deceived him, and she was an accomplice in this deception. And as he is saying these things dawn is breaking. And, horrified, he sees the gray light of morning. They come to get him to take him to the scaffold. And then he concludes with these words: "*Pompilia, ¿vas a dejar que me asesinen?*" That's what the man who murdered her says. "Pompilia, will you let them murder me?" And then the pope speaks. The pope here represents wisdom and truth. The pope thinks it is just for the murderer to be executed. And then we have a few reflections of Browning's.

Now, I have compared Browning to Kafka.¹⁹ You might remember that poem "Fears and Scruples," I looked at at the

beginning, that poem about the ambiguity of the relationship between the believer and God. The believer prays but does not know if there is a listener, an interlocutor. He does not know if there is really a dialogue. But in this book—and this is the fundamental difference between Browning and Kafka—Browning *knows*. He is not just playing with his imagination, Browning believes that there is a truth. Browning believes there is, or is not, a guilty party. He believes, that is, he was always attracted to, the ambiguity, the essential mystery of the human relationship to the universe, but Browning believed in a truth. Browning wrote this book, he imagined, he re-created this criminal episode in order to be able to confer a truth. And he believed he had come to it by using, of course, that metal he called baser, the metal in the gold alloy, the metal of his imagination.

Browning was essentially an optimist. There is a poem by Browning titled “Rabbi Ben Ezra.”²⁰ Rabbi Ben Ezra was a Spanish rabbi.²¹ Chesterton says that it is typical of Browning that, when he wanted to pronounce his final truth about the world, about mankind, about our hopes, he put this truth in the mouth of an obscure Spanish rabbi from the Middle Ages, a forgotten rabbi, about whom we know only that he lived in Toledo and afterwards in Italy, and who was always complaining about his bad luck. He said that he had such bad luck that if he had taken to selling candles, the sun would have never set, and if he had taken to selling shrouds, men would suddenly have become immortal. And Browning puts in the mouth of this Rabbi Ben Ezra the idea he came to about the world, the idea that everything we do not achieve on earth, we will achieve—or we are achieving—in heaven. And he says that what happens to us, what we see, is like the arc of a circumference. We see merely a fragment or even a very small curve, but the circumference—happiness, plenitude—exists elsewhere, and it will exist for us. Browning comes to the idea that old age is not only a decline, a mutilation, an impoverishment. Old age is also a

plenitude, because in old age we understand things.²² He came to believe this. This poem is another of Browning's great poems, and it concludes with this idea: that old age is the perfection of youth.

I began with the metaphor of the arc fragment and the full and complete circumference. There is a vast bibliography about Browning. There is an encyclopedia written about Browning, with often absurd explanations of his poems.²³ It says, for example, that the poem "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" is a poem about vivisection.²⁴ There are other absurd explanations. But perhaps the best book about Browning, a delightful book to read, is a book that Chesterton published in the first decade of this century, in the year 1907 or 1909, I think, and it is part of that admirable series, *English Men of Letters*.²⁵ Reading a biography of Chesterton, written by his secretary, Maisie Ward, I read that all of Chesterton's quotations of Browning in the book were wrong.²⁶ But they were wrong because Chesterton had read Browning so much that he had learned him by heart. And he had learned it so well that he had not needed to consult Browning's work a single time. He was wrong precisely because he knew it.²⁷ It is a pity that the editor of the series, *English Men of Letters*, Virginia Woolf's father, Leslie Stephen, reinstated the original text. It would have been interesting to compare Browning's original text to how they appear in Chesterton's text. Unfortunately, they were corrected, and the printed book contains Browning's texts. It would have been lovely to know how Chesterton transformed in his memory Browning's verses—for memory is also made up of forgetting.

I feel some kind of remorse. I think I have been unfair to Browning. But with Browning something happens that happens with all poets, that we must question them directly. I think, in any case, that I have done enough to interest you in Browning's work. The pity is, as I already said, that

Browning wrote his work in verse. If not, he would now be known as one of the great novelists and one of the most original short-story writers in the English language. Though if he had written in prose, we would have lost much admirable music. Because Browning was a consummate master of English verse. He mastered it as well as Tennyson, or Swinburne, or any other. But there is no doubt that for a book like *The Ring and the Book*—a book made up of the same story repeated several times—it would have been better in prose. The curious thing about *The Ring and the Book*, to which I will now return, is that although each character recounts the same events, and although there is no difference in *what* they tell, there is a fundamental difference, which belongs to the realm of human psychology, the fact that each of us believes we are justified. For example, the count admits he is a murderer, but the word “murderer” is too general. We know this from reading other books. If we read *Macbeth*, for example, or if we read *Crime and Punishment* by Dostoyevsky—I think the original is called “Guilt and Expiation”—we do not feel that Macbeth or Raskolnikov are murderers. That word is too blunt. We see how events have led them to commit a murder, which is not the same as being a murderer. Is a man defined by what he has done? Cannot a man commit a crime, and cannot his crime be justified? A man is led to the execution of a crime through thousands of circumstances. In the case of *Macbeth*, for example, we have the first scene with the three witches, who are also the three Fates. These witches prophesize what will take place. And so Macbeth, upon seeing that these prophecies are correct, comes to think that he was predestined to murder Duncan, his king, and then he commits other murders. And the same thing happens in *The Ring and the Book*: none of the characters lies, but each one of the characters feels justified. Now, Browning believes there is a guilty party, that this guilty party is the count, even though he thinks he is justified, given the circumstances, for murdering his wife.

And Chesterton, in his book about Browning, writes about other great poets; he says that Homer might have thought, for example, "I will tell them the truth about the world, and I will tell them the truth based on the fall of a great city, on the defense of that city," and he made the *Iliad*. And then another poet, whose name has been forgotten, says: "I will tell them the truth about the world, and I will tell it based on what a just man suffered, his friends' reproaches, the voice of God who descends in a swirl," and he wrote the *Book of Job*. And another poet could say, "I will tell them the truth about the world, and I will tell it by describing to them an imaginary or visionary journey through hell, purgatory, and paradise," and that poet is Dante. And Shakespeare could have thought, "I will tell them the truth about the world by telling stories about a son who learned, from a ghost's revelations, that his mother had been an adulteress and a murderer," and he wrote *Hamlet*. But what Browning did was stranger. He said, "I have found this story of a criminal trial, a sordid story of adultery, the story of a murder, the story of lies and deceptions. And based on that story, which all of Italy talked about, and which all of Italy has forgotten, I will reveal to them the truth about the world," and he wrote *The Ring and the Book*.

In the next class I will discuss the great English poet of Italian origin, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and I will begin by describing his tragic personal history. And then we will look at two or three of his poems, without excluding several of his sonnets, sonnets that are considered to be perhaps the most excellent in the English language.

CLASS 20

THE LIFE OF DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI. EVALUATION OF ROSSETTI AS A POET AND A PAINTER. THE THEME OF THE DOUBLE (FETCH). A BOOK OF EXHUMED POEMS. ROSSETTI'S POEMS. HISTORY CYCLICALLY REPEATED.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 2, 1966

Today we will talk about a poet, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who is quite different from Robert Browning, even though they were contemporaries, and even though Browning at first exercised a considerable influence over him. Rossetti's dates are easy to remember, for we have 1828 for his birth, and 1882—the two digits inverted—for his death. Moreover, there is a link between the two, which is the profound love they both felt toward Italy. In general, it is typical for the northern nations to love the Mediterranean nations, a love that is not always returned, of course. In Rossetti's case there is also the circumstance of his blood, which, except for that of one English grandmother, was Italian.

Rossetti was born in London. His father was an Italian refugee, a liberal, who had devoted himself—for good reason, like so many other Italians—to the study of *The Divine Comedy*.¹ At home I have eleven or twelve annotated editions of the *Comedy*, from the most ancient to the most modern, let us say. But I have not been able to acquire the edition of *The Divine Comedy* done by Rossetti's father.² Dante [Alighieri], in a letter to Cangrande della Scala, says his poem can be read in four ways.³ We can read it as a

fantasy tale of a journey through hell, purgatory, and paradise. But also, as a son of Dante's suggested, we can read it as a description of the life of a sinner, symbolized by hell; the life of a penitent, symbolized by purgatory; and the life of a righteous man, symbolized by the fortunate in paradise.⁴ And now that I have said this, I recall that the great pantheistic and mystical Irishman, Johannes Scotus Eriugena, said that the Holy Scriptures could contain an infinite number of interpretations, like the iridescent plumage of a peacock. And I believe there was a rabbi who wrote that the Holy Scriptures were specifically destined, predestined, for each of its readers. That is, it has a different meaning if any of you read it or if I read it, or if it is read by men in the future or in the past.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti's father's interpretation was mystical. Rossetti's biographers write that when Rossetti's father said the book was "*sommamente mistico*," this was the highest praise he could give it. Rossetti's mother was related to Byron's doctor, an Italian doctor whose name I now forget.⁵ Rossetti's home had an intellectual and political ambiance, for all the Italian refugees who went to London visited the Rossettis. Therefore, Rossetti grew up in a literary environment and was bilingual as a child. That is, he was equally familiar with the English of London and the Italian of his elders. From the time he was a child, Rossetti was raised in the cult of Dante and poets like Cavalcanti and others, and in addition he was drawn to the study of drawing and painting. His drawings are among the most delicate in England. As a *painter* ... I confess I have done everything possible—and there are, I think, friends of mine who have also had this experience—I have tried to admire—in the Tate Gallery, I believe—Rossetti's paintings; and I have always failed. It has been said as an all-too-obvious joke that as a painter he was a great poet, and as a poet he was a great painter. Or, as Chesterton expresses it, he was too good a painter to be an entirely great poet, and too good a poet to

be an entirely great painter. For my part, I understand very little about painting, but I think I understand something about poetry. And I am convinced—a conviction I am not sure the current literary fashions share—that Rossetti is one of the great English poets, that is, one of the world's great poets.

At first, Rossetti dedicated himself to drawing. His drawings were singularly delicate: there is that vibration in each of them, that beginning of movement that seems to be characteristic of great drawings. As for his paintings, the figures are awkward, the colors seem to me too coarse and vivid. Moreover, they are supposed to be illustrations, illustrations sometimes of his own poems. It is an odd labor to take a poem that is decidedly visual—as are many of Rossetti's, such as "The Blessed Damozel"—and compare it to its felicitous version in an oil painting. In the British Museum, Rossetti became somewhat familiar (at the time, reproductions as we have now did not exist) with the work of painters prior to Raphael. And he reached the conclusion—scandalous at the time and still not accepted by all—that Raphael represented not the apogee of painting as everybody then affirmed, but rather the beginning of the decline of that art. He believed that the Italian and Flemish artists before Raphael were superior to him. And along with a group of friends, William Holman Hunt, Burne-Jones, who were then joined by some famous poets, William Morris and Swinburne first of all, founded a society called the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.⁶ But they were less interested in imitating the pre-Raphaelites than painting with the honesty, simplicity, and deep emotion that they saw in those men, "the early men" at the beginning, we can say. And they founded a magazine with the unfortunate title *The Germ* to spread their ideas, and that of the new painting and their poetry. I have said that aesthetic movements are rare in England. I don't mean they don't exist. What I mean to say is that poets and painters do not, as in France, tend to form coteries and publish manifestos. This seems to be in

keeping with English individualism, and also a certain modesty, a certain bashfulness. I remember the case of Thackeray, whom some people from a magazine went to see in order to write an article about him. He was famous as a novelist, Dickens's rival, and in answer he said, "I am a private gentleman," and did not allow them to write about him or portray him. He thought that the work of the writer should be public, but his life should not be.

Now, as far as poetry is concerned, the theories of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood did not differ much from those of Wordsworth, though their application, as often happens in these circumstances, was totally different, for there is no similarity at all between a poem by Wordsworth and a poem by Swinburne, Rossetti, or Morris. Moreover, Rossetti began, like Coleridge, using a deliberate and artificial medieval language, like the subjects of his paintings. In this course we have not had time to talk about the cycle of legends of Celtic origin that arose in England and were then taken to Brittany by the British who fled from the Saxon and Anglo invasions. You know these legends, they are the nucleus of Quixote's library: the stories of King Arthur, of the Round Table, the guilty love between the queen and Lancelot, the search for the Holy Grail, etcetera.⁷ And these subjects, which are later written about in England in a book called *Le Morte d'Arthur*, were at first the pre-Raphaelists' favorite subjects, though many also painted contemporary subjects (several of these paintings, to their viewers' shock, were of workers, railways, a newspaper tossed on the ground).⁸ All of this was new at the time. The earlier belief, that poetry should seek noble subjects, was applied to painting. And what was noble, of course, was what had the patina, the prestige, of the past.

But let us now return to Dante Gabriel Rossetti's biography. Dante Rossetti has been called—after the title of a poem by Browning—"the Italian in England." It is curious that he never wanted to visit Italy. Perhaps he felt that such

a visit was unnecessary, since Italy was in his reading and ran in his veins. The fact is that Rossetti did undertake a “trip to the continent,” as they say in English, but he did not go beyond France and the Low Countries. He never went to Italy, though in Italy they would not have been able to tell that he was English. And since he was born in London, he liked to take on—this seems typical of men of letters—the dialect of the city, cockney. This would be as if he had been born in Buenos Aires and felt obliged to speak in *lunfardo*.⁹ Rossetti was a man of strong passions, with a violent nature, as was Browning. By the way, Browning never liked Rossetti’s poems; he thought they were, as he said, “artificially perfumed.” That is, that in addition to the natural passion arising from a subject—which Wordsworth sought and found in his best pages—Rossetti liked to add adornments, sometimes foreign to the subject itself. Rossetti actually studied Shakespeare a lot, and in many of his poems, his language, no less passionate than Shakespeare’s for being more artificial, shows this. For example, there is a poem in which he speaks of insomnia, and he says that sleep watches him from afar while he is awake “with cold commemorative eyes,” “*con fríos ojos conmemorativos*.”¹⁰ You see, it is perhaps the first time that the word “eye” is joined with “commemorative,” which surely can be justified etymologically, for it is eyes that remember, that commemorate the past.

Rossetti frequented drawing academies, painting academies, and met a girl named Siddal, who was his model for almost all his paintings.¹¹ And thereby was created a type, the Rossetti type, as other painters have done subsequently. This girl was a tall girl with red hair, and a long neck (like Edith Swanneck about whom we spoke when we talked about the death of the last Saxon king of England, Harold) and with full lips, very sensual lips, that I think are now again in fashion. But this type was new then, and so Miss Siddal was the Black Queen or Mary Magdalene, or any

other Greek or medieval character. They fell in love. Rossetti married very young and then found out what he already knew: that this woman had a very sickly constitution. Rossetti taught drawing at a night school for workers founded by the great critic and writer [John] Ruskin, who was a patron of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Now, Rossetti had other models. One model he used only a few times, but he fell in love with her, physically in love, according to what has been said. She was a large woman, also with red hair—red hair always held a fascination for Rossetti—and she was so large that he jokingly called her “the elephant.” But he could do so with impunity, for she was not offended by it.

And now we come to the tragic event, one of the most tragic events of Rossetti’s life. This event does not figure in all the biographies, as it has only recently come to light. Because until the beginning of this century, it was understood in England that these things were not to be spoken of. But the last biography of Rossetti speaks quite frankly about this episode, and I think I can recount it without lacking in decorum.

One night, the poet Swinburne went to Rossetti’s house to eat. They ate together, and after dinner, Rossetti told him that he had to go teach a class at the college for workers founded by Ruskin, and he invited Swinburne to accompany him. Swinburne and Rossetti said goodbye to Rossetti’s wife, and once they had turned the corner, Rossetti told Swinburne that he did not have to teach a class that night, that he was going to visit “the elephant.” Swinburne understood perfectly, and the two men said goodbye to each other. Swinburne, anyway, already knew this about Rossetti and was not unduly surprised. Rossetti remained very late at the house of “the elephant,” let’s say—I forgot her name. And when he returned, he found that his house was dark, and his wife was dead. She had died from swallowing a fatal dose of chloral, which she often took

for insomnia.¹² Rossetti immediately understood that she knew everything and had committed suicide.

I forgot to say that Rossetti spent his honeymoon with his wife in Paris, and that while there, he painted a very strange painting, considering what happened later, and considering Rossetti's superstitious nature. The canvas, which does not have—in my opinion—any artistic merits, is in the Tate Gallery or maybe the British Museum, I don't remember, and is called "How They Met Themselves." I don't know if you know about a superstition that exists in many countries of the world, the superstition about the double. In German, the double is called the *Doppelgänger*, and means the one who walks next to us.¹³ In Scotland, where this superstition still exists, the double is called the "fetch" ("fetch" in English means "to seek"), and it is understood that if a man meets himself, it is a sign that death is approaching.¹⁴ In other words, that the apparition of the double is coming to fetch him. And there is a ballad by Stevenson, which we will look at later, called "Ticonderoga," about the "fetch."¹⁵ Now, this painting by Rossetti is not about an individual who meets himself, but about a pair of lovers who meet (with themselves) at twilight in a forest, and one of the lovers is Rossetti and the other is his wife. Now, we will never know why Rossetti painted this painting. He might have thought that by painting it, he was dispelling the possibility of it happening, and we can also conjecture—though there is no letter by Rossetti that verifies this—that Rossetti and his wife did meet themselves in Fontainebleau, or in some other place in France. The Hebrews also had this superstition, about meeting one's double. But for them, the fact that a man meets himself does not mean that death is approaching, but rather than he has arrived at a prophetic state. There is a Talmudic legend about three men who go in search of God. One became insane, the other died, and the third met himself. But let us return to Rossetti.

Rossetti returns home and finds [his wife] poisoned, and suspects or understands what has happened. When Rossetti discovers that she has died from an overdose of chloral, he assumes she took too much; he accepts this—Rossetti accepts it—but feels deeply guilty. She is buried the next day, and Rossetti takes advantage of a moment of inattention by his friends to place on the dead woman's chest a notebook manuscript, a notebook of the sonnets that would later be collected under the title *The House of Life*. Surely, Rossetti thought this was a way he could carry out an act of expiation. Rossetti thought that because he was in some way guilty of her death, was his wife's murderer, he could do nothing better than sacrifice his work to her. Rossetti had already published one book—you will find its contents in the edition of Rossetti's poems and translations in Everyman's Library—a translation of *La Vita Nuova* by Dante.¹⁶ It is a literal translation, except that it is written in archaic English. Moreover, as you know, *La Vita Nuova* by Dante includes many sonnets, and those sonnets were admirably translated into English by Rossetti together with poems by Cavalcanti and other contemporary poets. Rossetti had published some versions of the poems that would make him famous in the magazine *The Germ*—poems he later corrected heavily—for example, "The Blessed Damozel," "I Have Been Here Before," and, I believe, the strange ballad "Troy Town," and others.¹⁷ When I spoke about Coleridge, I said that in his first version of "The Ancient Mariner," he used an English that was deliberately and purely archaic, and that in the versions we now study, he modernized the language, made it more accessible and plain. The same thing happens with the ballad "The Blessed Damozel."

Rossetti, after the death of his wife, broke off his *liaison* with "the elephant" and lived alone. He bought a kind of country estate on the outskirts of London and there he devoted himself to poetry, and especially to painting. He saw very few people. He, who had so liked conversation,

above all conversations in the pubs of London. And there he lived retired, alone, until the year of his death in 1882. He saw very few people. Among them was an agent of his who took charge of selling his paintings, for which Rossetti asked very high prices, not so much out of greed but rather out of a kind of disdain, as if to say, "If people are interested in my paintings, they should pay well for them, and if they don't buy them, I don't care." Before, he had had an argument with a Scottish critic, Buchanan, who had been scandalized by the frankness, we could call it, of some of Rossetti's poems.[18](#)

Three or four years after the death of his wife, Rossetti's friends gathered to talk to him: they told him that he had made a useless sacrifice, and that his wife herself could not have been pleased by the fact that he had deliberately renounced the fame, perhaps the glory, that the publication of that manuscript would have brought him. So Rossetti, who had kept no copy of these poems, relented. And he took some rather disagreeable steps; he obtained permission to exhume the manuscript that he had placed on his wife's chest. Naturally, Rossetti was not present at that scene worthy of Poe. Rossetti stayed in a pub and got drunk. In the meantime, his friends exhumed the body and managed—it was not easy because the hands were stiff and crossed—but they managed to rescue the manuscript. And the manuscript had white patches from the putrefaction of the body, from death, and this manuscript was published and brought Rossetti glory. For that reason, Rossetti is included in the curriculum of the study of English literature in South America, and that is why we are studying him.

As for his argument with Buchanan, Buchanan published an anonymous article titled "The Fleshly School of Poetry," to which Rossetti answered with a pamphlet titled "The Stealthy School of Criticism," which the other could not answer.

Rossetti's erotic sonnets are among the most beautiful of English literature. And now they don't seem to us to be

too erotic, as they could have seemed during the Victorian era. I have an edition of Rossetti published in 1903, and I have looked through it in vain for one of his most admirable sonnets, titled “Nuptial Sleep,” which refers to a wedding night. We will return to it later.

Rossetti dies in 1882, at that country estate where there was a small zoological garden with kangaroos and other strange animals. It was a small zoo, and all the animals were small. And then Rossetti dies suddenly. Rossetti became addicted to chloral, and he dies from an overdose. According to all indications, he repeated the suicide of his wife. That is, both their deaths justify the painting “How They Met Themselves,” painted in Paris many years before, because Elizabeth Siddal died young. Hence, we are looking at a tragic destiny. Some have attributed this destiny to his Italian blood, but it seems absurd to me that Italian blood necessarily leads to a tragic life, or that an Italian is necessarily more passionate than an Englishman.

And now let us read some of Rossetti’s work. We are going to begin with this sonnet I spoke to you about, “Nuptial Sleep.” I do not remember all the details, but I do remember the plot.¹⁹ It begins by saying, “*Al fin su largo beso se separó*” [“At length their kiss severed”], and they separated. And then he compares the two lovers with a branch that forks, and says “their lips” separated after an act of love, but their lips were still close. And then it says that just as after the rain, the last drops of water fall from the roof tiles—here he is alluding to something else, of course—in the same way, each of their hearts continued beating separately. The two tired lovers fall asleep, but Rossetti, with a beautiful metaphor, says: “Sleep sank them lower than the tide of dreams.” “*El sueño los hundió más abajo de la marea de los sueños.*” The night passes, and the dawn awakens them, and then their souls, which were under sleep, wake up. And they slowly emerge from sleep as if it were water. But he is referring here, not to the woman’s soul, but rather to the man’s. And then he says that among the

drowned remnants of the day—he sees marvels of new forests and streams—he awoke. That is, he had had a marvelous dream, he had dreamed of an unknown, splendid land, because his soul was full of the splendors of love. *“Él se despertó y se maravilló aún más porque ahí estaba ella.”* That is, the fact of waking up, of returning from a fantasy world, returning to reality, and seeing that the reality is there—the woman he loved and worshipped for so long—and seeing her sleeping by his side, in his arms, is even more wonderful than the dream. “He woke and wondered more: for there she lay.” You can see in these lines by a poet of Italian origins that all the words are Germanic and simple. I don’t think Rossetti was looking for this effect, because if he had, it would seem artificial to us, and it is not.

And now I want to recall the beginning of another sonnet by Rossetti, for today I will not have time to talk about his great poems. This is a poem in which there is something cinematic, something playful, with a cinematic vision, even though it was written around 1850, in an era when cinematography was not even imagined. And he says, *“¿Qué hombre se ha inclinado sobre el rostro de su hijo, para pensar cómo esa cara, ese rostro / se inclinará sobre él cuando esté muerto?”* “What man has bent to his son’s face and brood, / How that face shall watch his when cold it lies?”²⁰ And here we have, as I have said, a play of images we would call cinematic. First, we have the face of the father who bends anxiously over the face of the son, and then the two images change places because he thinks of a certain future, when his face is the one that is lying down, dead, and it will be the face of the son who is bending over him. There is something like a transposition of the two faces. Then: *“O pensó cuando su propia madre le besaba los ojos / lo que habrá sido su beso cuando su padre la cortejaba.”* [“Or thought, as his own mother kissed his eyes, / Of what her kiss was when his father wooed?”] That is, we move from the image of a dream and death to this other image, which is no

less profound, of love. And we have the strange rhyme, such a sweet rhyme: “brood” and “wooed.”

Here is the beginning of another one of Rossetti’s great sonnets, a poem whose title has been used by Priestley for one of his comedies about time, in which he plays with time—for example, *An Inspector Calls* and *Time and the Conways*.²¹ This is the phrase Priestley chose: “I have been here before.” Rossetti says, “*Pero cuándo y dónde no puedo decirlo. / Conozco el pasto más allá de la puerta, / conozco la brusca y dulce fragancia.*” [“But when or how I cannot tell: / I know the grass beyond the door, / The sweet keen smell.”] Then there is something I forget, and then speaking with a woman, he says, “You have been mine before.” Then he says what has happened thousands of times and will happen again, that they will separate, they will die, and then they will be born in another life, “yet never break the chain.” As you know, this is the doctrine of the Stoics, the Pythagoreans, Nietzsche, the idea that universal history repeats itself cyclically. In *The City of God*, Saint Augustine erroneously attributes the idea to Plato, who did not teach it, [and he also] attributes it to Pythagoras. He says that Pythagoras would teach it to his students and tell them that this doctrine “that I am teaching you”—it would later be called eternal return—“shows us that this has already happened many times, I myself with this staff in my hand, have explained this to you, and you have listened to me an infinite number of times, and will go on to hear it an infinite number of times from my lips.” I wish I had time to talk about the Scottish philosopher David Hume, who was the first of the eighteenth century to defend that theory, which seems so fantastical. He says that if the world, the entire universe, is made of a limited number of elements—now we would call them atoms—this number, though incalculable, is not infinite. And so, each moment depends on the moment before. It is enough for one moment to be repeated for all the following ones to be repeated as well. We should take a rather simple image. Let us take the image of a deck of

cards, and let us suppose that an immortal person is shuffling them. So, they will be dealt out in different orders. But if time is infinite, there will come a moment when he will deal the ace of *oros*, the two of *oros*, the three of *oros*, etcetera, etcetera. This, of course, is rather simple because it deals with forty elements. But in the universe we can assume there are forty billion upon billions of elements to the forth or the fifth degree, or to whatever we wish. But it is always a finite number. In other words, the time will come when the combinations will repeat themselves, and then each of us will be born again and repeat each of the circumstances of our life. And I will pick up this watch, and I will announce that it is seven o'clock and we will inexorably end our class.

Now, Dickens says that he had an experience of having already lived a particular moment. According to psychologists, this experience can be simply a moment of tiredness: we perceive the present, but if we are tired, we forget it. Then, when we perceive it fully, there is no abyss of thousands of centuries between one experience and another, but rather the abyss of our distraction. We could say to Pythagoras and Rossetti that if we, at a particular moment of our lives, have the sensation of having already lived a particular moment, that moment is not exactly the same as the moment of the previous life. That is, the fact of remembering a previous moment is an argument against that theory. But that is unimportant. The important thing is that Rossetti has written an admirable poem titled, "I Have Been Here Before," and Priestley wrote almost as admirable a play on the same subject: that each of our biographies is a series of trivial circumstances that have already taken place thousands of time and will take place again.²²

In the next class, we will look at two of Rossetti's long poems, "The Blessed Damozel" and "Troy Town," and perhaps "Eden Bower," which is about Adam's first love—not with Eve, but rather with Lilith, the demon or serpent.

CLASS 21

ROSSETTI'S POEM. ROSSETTI AS SEEN BY MAX NORDAU.
"THE BLESSED DAMOZEL," "EDEN BOWER," AND "TROY TOWN."

MONDAY, DECEMBER 5, 1966

In the previous class we looked at some of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's minor poems—minor in length, though no less worthy. His most famous poem, archaically titled "The Blessed Damozel"—"damozel" is a Norman word that means young lady, or *demoiselle*, and is usually translated into Spanish as "*La Doncella bienaventurada*," which, as you know, is both a painting and a poem by Rossetti. The plot of "The Blessed Damozel" is strange. It is about the misfortunes of a person, of a soul in heaven. It is about her misfortunes because she is awaiting the arrival of another soul. The blessed damsel has sinned, but her sin has been forgiven, and when the poem begins, she is in heaven; but—and this first detail is significant—she has her back to heaven. She is leaning over the gold bar from which she can see the sun and the earth below. That is, she is so high that she sees the sun far below her, as if lost, and she also sees a kind of pulse that beats throughout the universe.

Now, this poem, like almost all of Rossetti's, is extraordinarily visual. Heaven is not vague. Everything is extraordinarily vivid, everything has an increasingly ominous—and at the end a bit terrible—quality, but it is never simplistic. The first stanza says:

The blessed damozel leaned out
From the gold bar of Heaven;
Her eyes were deeper than the depth
Of waters stilled at even;
She had three lilies in her hand,
And the stars in her hair were seven.

That is:

*La Doncella Bienaventurada se inclinó
sobre la baranda de oro del Cielo;
sus ojos eran más profundos que la hondura
de aguas aquietadas al atardecer;
tenía tres lirios en la mano
y las estrellas de su pelo eran siete.*

The poet does not say “she had three lilies in her hand and seven stars in her hair” but rather “the stars in her hair were seven.” Then he says that the blessed damsel feels as if only one day had passed since she arrived in heaven, but years had passed, because in Heaven time does not pass as it does on Earth, time is different. This reminds us of that Muslim legend about Muhammad being carried up to heaven by Burak, the mare.¹ The mare, when she starts flying with him—she is a kind of winged Pegasus, with the feathers of a peacock, I think—pushes over a water jug. Then she carries Muhammad to heaven, to the Seventh Heaven. There he talks to the angels and passes through where the angels live. Finally he talks to the Lord. He feels a kind of chill when the Lord’s hand touches his shoulder, and then he returns to Earth. And when he returns, the whole journey has seemed to take so long to him—the opposite happens in Rossetti’s poem—but all the water has still not spilled out of the jug. On the contrary, in Rossetti’s poem, the damsel believes that she has spent a short time in heaven, and years have passed. That damsel knows she is in heaven, her

companions are described, their names are given, some kind of garden and palaces are described. But she turns her back on heaven and looks toward Earth, because the lover with whom she has sinned is on Earth, and she thinks that he will not be long in coming. She thinks that she will take him by the hand to the Virgin, that the Virgin will understand and his sin will be forgiven. Then Rossetti describes heaven. There are some details that are rather terrible. For example, there is a tree with deep, dark foliage, and sometimes one feels that the dove lives inside that tree, the dove that is the Holy Spirit, and the leaves seem to whisper his name. The poem is interrupted by parentheses, and these parentheses correspond to what the lover on Earth is thinking and feeling. The lover is in a square and looks up, because he also is looking for her as she is looking for him from the heights of paradise. And then she thinks about the delights they will share when he is in heaven, and she thinks that they will journey together into the deep wells of light. She thinks that there they will bathe together in God's sight. And then it says, "all this will be when he comes, for surely he will come." But because the poem is long, we see that all this hope is futile, that he will not be forgiven and that she is condemned, we could say, to heaven, as he will be condemned to hell when he dies, for his sin. And she herself seems to feel this, because in the last stanza she leans over the gold bar of heaven. And she wept; and the stanza ends "*y lloró*," "and wept." And then, in parentheses, words that belong to the lover's conscience, "*Yo oí sus lágrimas*," "I heard her tears."

Dr. Max Nordau, in a book that was famous at the beginning of this century, titled *Degeneration*, took this poem as proof that Rossetti was a degenerate.² He says that the poem is incoherent, that the poet has already stated that time passes more quickly in heaven, and many years have passed, but the look of astonishment in the damsel's eyes is still there, so she will have only to wait one or two days at the most before she meets her lover. That is, Dr.

Nordau read and analyzed the poem and did not understand that the lover would never come, and that this was the theme of the poem: the misfortune of a soul in heaven because it lacks the happiness it had on Earth. The poem—according to him—is full of circumstantial details. For example, the girl is leaning over a gold bar of heaven until—Rossetti tell us—her breasts must have warmed the metal of the barrier. And there are other similar details: at first everything is wondrous and then we have details like the one that says: “*de ese árbol en cuya hondura se siente la paloma,*” [“that ... tree within whose secret growth the Dove is sometimes felt to be”]. In other words, it is what Chesterton said, “delight bordering on the edges of nightmare.” There is the suggestion of a nightmare in the whole poem, and in the final stanzas we feel that even if paradise is beautiful, it is horrible for the damsel because her lover is not there, that he will never come, he will not be forgiven as she was. Now, I don’t know if any of you would like to read out loud some of the stanzas in English, so that you hear the music. Does anybody dare?

[*A female student volunteers.*]

Let’s read the poem from the beginning. Read it slowly, because perhaps your classmates are not “blessed” and won’t understand very much.³

The blessed damozel leaned out
From the gold bar of Heaven;
Her eyes were deeper than the depth
Of waters stilled at even;
She had three lilies in her hand,
And the stars in her hair were seven.

In this first stanza we have what is called a visual rhyme. For example, *heaven* “rhymes” with *even* because they are written the same; it is understood to be a rhyme. Hence Byron says, for example, in one of his lines, “like the

cry of some strong swimmer in his agony,” “*como el grito de un fuerte nadador en su agonía.*”⁴ And I remember that as a child I pronounced agony as “agonay” to make it rhyme with “cry,” and my father explained to me that no, it was a “visual rhyme,” that first I had to pronounce *cry* and then *agony*, because that orthographic convention was acceptable in poetry, and it was even considered a rich element. For example, “come,” rhymes with “home,” because both words end with o-m-e. And this is not considered a defect, but rather a way of alleviating, we could say, the weight of the rhyme. It is as if in England they had not fully grown accustomed to rhymes, and without realizing it they felt some kind of nostalgia for ancient Anglo-Saxon poetry, counted in assonants. But let us read it from the beginning, and I promise to behave myself and not interrupt the stanzas.

[*The student reads the first stanza again, then continues.*]

Her robe, ungirt from clasp to hem,
No wrought flowers did adorn,
But a white rose of Mary’s gift,
For service meetly worn;
Her hair that lay along her back
Was yellow like ripe corn.

That’s a beautiful detail, where he compares her hair to corn.

Herseemed she scarce had been a day
One of God’s choristers;
The wonder was not yet quite gone
From that still look of hers;
Albeit, to them she left, her day
Had counted as ten years.

“Herseemed” is a slightly archaic way of saying “seemed to her”: it seemed to her that only a day had passed. “Choristers” should be translated into Spanish as *coristas*, not a very noble word, but that is the exact translation. Rossetti, given his Italian heritage, tended to make his words stressed on the last syllable. We see here “choristers” rhyming with “hers,” which doesn’t normally happen. It is one of his peculiarities, above all for the rhyme.

*A ella le parecía haber pasado apenas un día
de que era una de las coristas de Dios;
todavía no se había ido del todo el asombro
de su tranquila mirada,
para aquellos a quienes ella había dejado, su día
había sido contado como diez años.*

In other words, ten years have passed, but she believes that she has been in heaven only one day. And then there follows a parenthesis. Now the lover speaks, in parentheses, and he says he has waited so long that the years feel like they are truly made of years, and he thinks he feels her hair falling over his face. But it wasn’t that, it was the leaves of autumn that fell over his face from the trees in the square.

[*The reader continues.*]

(To one, it is ten years of years.
. . . Yet now, and in this place,
Surely she leaned o’er me—her hair
Fell all about my face. . . .
Nothing: the autumn-fall of leaves.
The whole year sets apace.)

It was the rampart of God’s house
That she was standing on;
By God built over the sheer depth

The which is Space begun;
So high, that looking downward thence
She scarce could see the sun.

It lies in Heaven, across the flood
Of ether, as a bridge.
Beneath, the tides of day and night
With flame and darkness ridge
The void, as low as where this earth
Spins like a fretful midge.

She was “*sobre la muralla edificada por Dios, sobre la caída, donde empieza el espacio, tan alto que mirando desde arriba apenas podía ver el sol*” [“It was the rampart of God’s house / That she was standing on; / By God built over the sheer depth / The which is Space begun ...”] and time is passing quickly, like tides (dark tides and light tides), and these are the day and the night. In this fantastical poem everything is very precise, and the precision is contained in the metaphors. Everything is very visual.

Around her, lovers, newly met
’Mid deathless love’s acclaims,
Spoke evermore among themselves
Their heart-remembered names;
And the souls mounting up to God
Went by her like thin flames.

She is surrounded by lovers who have just met. That is, who are more fortunate than she, who can enjoy full happiness in heaven. “*Y las almas que iban subiendo a Dios*” [“And the souls mounting up to God”], among whom could be the soul of her lover, were “*como delgadas llamas*” [“like thin flames”].

And still she bowed herself and stooped

Out of the circling charm;
Until her bosom must have made
The bar she leaned on warm,
And the lilies lay as if asleep
Along her bended arm.

"Y ella seguía inclinándose" ["And still she bowed herself"]—because she was impatient—*"y su pecho debió entibiar el metal de la baranda"* ["Until her bosom must have made / The bar she leaned on warm"] which I pointed out earlier. *"Y los lirios estaban como dormidos"* ["And the lilies lay as if asleep"].

From the fixed place of Heaven she saw
Time like a pulse shake fierce
Through all the worlds. Her gaze still strove
Within the gulf to pierce
Its path; and now she spoke as when
The stars sang in their spheres.

"Y luego ella habló, como cuando las estrellas / cantaron en sus esferas." That is, on the first days of Genesis. We also have in this line the alliteration of "stars" and "sang."

The sun was gone now; the curled moon
Was like a little feather
Fluttering far down the gulf; and now
She spoke through the still weather.
Her voice was like the voice of the stars
Had when they sang together.

"Y su voz era como la voz que tenían las estrellas / cuando cantaron juntas."

(Ah sweet! Even now, in that bird's song,

Strove not her accents there,
Fain to be hearkened? When those bells
Possessed the mid-day air,
Strove not her steps to reach my side
Down all the echoing stair?)

"I wish that he were come to me,
For he will come," she said.
Have I not prayed in Heaven?—on earth,
Lord, Lord, has he not pray'd?
Are not two prayers a perfect strength?
And shall I feel afraid?"

There is a question. It asks "*No está tratando su voz de buscar desde la altura?*" ["Strove not her accents there, / Fain to be hearkened?"] And she says "*Yo deseo que él venga a mí, porque él vendrá . . .*" ["I wish that he were come to me, / For he will come . . ."] And she says that "he will come" in order to convince herself. She is already feeling uncertain. "'For he will come,' she said." "*¿Acaso no he rezado al Cielo, Señor? ¿Acaso él no ha rezado?*" ["Have not I prayed in Heaven? . . . / Lord, has he not pray'd?"] She begins to be afraid, but she says: "*¿Y debo sentir miedo?*" ["And shall I feel afraid?"]

"When round his head the aureole clings,
And he is clothed in white,
I'll take his hand and go with him
To the deep wells of light;
As unto a stream we will step down,
And bathe there in God's sight."

"*Cuando la aureola rodee su cabeza y él esté vestido de blanco . . .*" ["When round his head the aureole clings, / And he is clothed in white . . ."]—that is, when he is dead and has been forgiven—"yo lo tomaré de la mano y lo

llevaré a los hondos pozos de luz . . . ” [“I’ll take his hand and go with him / To the deep wells of light . . . ”]. Here Nordau said that because the poet is combining an image of heaven with the erotic vision of two lovers bathing together in a pond, he must be a degenerate.

“We two will stand beside that shrine,
Occult, withheld, untrod,
Whose lamps are stirred continually
With prayer sent up to God;
And see our old prayers, granted, melt
Each like a little cloud.

“We two will lie i’ the shadow of
That living mystic tree
Within whose secret growth the Dove
Is sometimes felt to be,
While every leaf that His plumes touch
Saith His Name audibly.”

Okay, look at the shrine, “*cuyas luces están agitadas continuamente por las plegarias que suben hacia Dios, y veremos que las plegarias se disolverán como si fuesen nubecitas, y dormiremos a la sombra de este místico árbol viviente*” [“Whose lamps . . . That living mystic tree . . . ”] here it is—“*Donde se dice que a veces está la paloma . . .*” [Within whose secret growth the Dove . . . ”], that is, the Holy Spirit, “*Y cada hoja que tocan sus plumas dice audiblemente su nombre*” [“While every leaf . . . / Saith His Name audibly”].

“And I myself will teach to him,
I myself, lying so,
The songs I sing here; which his voice
Shall pause in, hushed and slow,
And find some knowledge at each pause,

Or some new thing to know.”

And then she says that she is going to teach him the songs she has learned and each of the verses will reveal something to him.

(Alas! We two, we two, thou say'st!
Yea, one wast thou with me
That once of old. But shall God lift
To endless unity
The soul whose likeness with thy soul
Was but its love for thee?)

Now the lover enters: “*Tú dices ‘nosotros dos,’ pero nostoros somos uno.*” [“We two . . . once of old.”] There is a kind of conversation going on between the two of them, because what he says seems to answer what she says. Though, of course, he cannot hear her. However, they seem to have remained united as they had been on Earth. Now, you can see that this poem is in a way also a story. That is to say, luckily for us, it has been written in verse, but it could be a story in prose, a fantastical story. It is essentially narrative.

“We two,” she said, “will seek the groves
Where the lady Mary is,
With her five handmaidens, whose names
Are five sweet symphonies,
Cecily, Gertrude, Magdalen,
Margaret and Rosalys.

“Circlewise sit they, with bound locks
And foreheads garlanded;
Into the fine cloth white like flame
Weaving the golden thread,
To fashion the birth-robcs for them

Who are just born, being dead.”

“*Y buscaremos dónde está Lady Mary con sus cinco doncellas . . .*” [“We two . . . will seek the groves / Where the lady Mary is, / With her five handmaidens . . .”] whom she names. They are weaving the garments for those who have just been born because they have died, in other words, they have just been born in heaven.

“He shall fear, haply, and be dumb:
Then will I lay my cheek
To his, and tell about our love,
Not once abashed or weak:
And the dear Mother will approve
My pride, and let me speak.

“Herself shall bring us, hand in hand,
To him round whom all souls
Kneel, the clear-ranged unnumbered heads
Bowed with their aureoles:
And angels meeting us shall sing
To their citherns and citoles.”

She says that she is going to collect myrrh and laurel and will tell the Virgin of their love, without any shame, and the dear mother will pray for them. In other words, the Virgin will allow their love to be fruitful. “*Y ella misma nos ayudará ante Aquel frente a quien se arrodillan todas las almas . . .*” [“Herself shall bring us . . . To him round whom all souls / Kneel . . .”], in other words, Jesus Christ.

“There will I ask of Christ the Lord
Thus much for him and me:—
Only to live as once on earth
With Love,—only to be,
As then awhile, for ever now

Together, I and he.”

“*Yo le preguntaré a Cristo, el Señor, esto para él y para mí . . .*” [“There will I ask . . . for him and me”]. She does not want to ask for anything else. The only thing she wants is to be happy in heaven as she was once happy on Earth. There is a sonnet by Unamuno on this same subject, in which he asks for no happiness other than the happiness he has known on Earth, and this is what she is going to ask of Jesus Christ, that they be happy in heaven as they were on Earth.⁵ It is a very passionate plea: “*que para siempre estemos juntos*” [“for ever now / Together, I and he”].

She gazed and listened and then said,
Less sad of speech than mild,—
“All this is when he comes.” She ceased.
The light thrilled towards her, fill’d
With angels in strong level flight.
Her eyes prayed, and she smil’d.

(I saw her smile.) But soon their path
Was vague in distant spheres:
And then she cast her arms along
The golden barriers,
And laid her face between her hands,
And wept. (I heard her tears.)

And finally: “*Todo eso ocurrirá cuando llegue*” [“All this is when he comes”], and the air was “*lleno de ángeles en fuerte vuelo*” [“With angels in strong flight”]. “*Sus ojos rezaron, y sonrió.*” “*Yo vi su sonrisa / Pero pronto / su camino fue vago . . . Y luego ella puso sus brazos sobre Las barreras de oro . . . Y lloró.*” Then, “I heard her tears.”

Well, there is another poem, also both heavenly and terrible, called “Eden Bower.” Now “bower” is translated into Spanish in the dictionary as *glorieta* [arbor], but here it

should be translated as *alcoba* [bedchamber]. *Alcoba* suggests a closed place. “Bower” is a place where two lovers meet. And here, in this poem, Rossetti has taken a Jewish tradition, because I think that in some Jewish text, it says, “Before Eve came Lilith.” In Eden, Lilith was a snake and Adam’s first wife before his human wife, Eve. But in Rossetti’s poem this snake is in the shape of a woman and gives Adam two children. And Rossetti tells us directly all about these children; but we understand that the children were snakes, because he says, “shapes that coiled in the woods and waters” (“*formas que se encroscaban en las selvas y en las aguas*”) are “glittering sons and radiant daughters” (“*hijos resplandecientes e hijas radiantes*”). Then God puts Adam to sleep and takes Eve out of his rib, and Lilith obviously is envious, and she has to take revenge. So she seeks out her first lover, who was a snake, and gives herself to him and asks him to give her his shape. And then she will take the shape of the snake and she will tempt Eve, and then Adam and Eve will be expelled from Eden: “And where there were trees there shall be tares.” And Adam and Eve will wander the Earth, and Eve will give birth to Cain, and then to Abel. Cain will kill Abel, “and then you,” she tells the snake, “will drink the blood of the dead.”

Now we will listen to a few stanzas of this Rossetti poem—not all, because it is a long poem. I request the use of your voice again, young lady.

[*The student comes up and begins to read.*]

It was Lilith the wife of Adam:
(Eden bower’s in flower.)
Not a drop of her blood was human,
But she was made like a soft sweet woman.

There are refrains that are repeated. It has a very strong rhythm:

*Era Lilith la mujer de Adán,
(la alcoba de ellos está en flor.)*

There is an internal rhyme: “bower” and “flower. And
Lilith:

*En sus venas no había una gota de sangre humana,
pero ella era como una dulce mujer.*

[*The student continues reading.*]

Lilith stood on the skirts of Eden;
(And O the bower of the hour!)
She was the first that thence was driven;
With her was hell and with Eve was heaven.

In the ear of the Snake said Lilith:—
(Eden bower’s in flower.)
“To thee I come when the rest is over;
A snake was I when thou wast my lover.

“I was the fairest snake in Eden:
(And O the bower and the hour!)
By the earth’s will, new form and feature
Made me a wife for the earth’s new creature.

“Take me thou as I come from Adam:
(Eden bower’s in flower.)
Once again shall my love subdue thee;
The past is past and I am come to thee.

“Y ella estaba en los confines del Paraíso . . . ” [“Lilith
stood on the skirts of Eden . . . ”]. When she has been
expelled from Eden because they have created Eve. *“Con
ella está el Infierno y con Eva está el Cielo”* [“With her was

hell and with Eve was heaven"]. And this is what she could not bear, because she was in love with Adam. And so she tells the snake, who was her first lover: "*He aquí, vuelvo a ti cuando ha pasado lo demás, / yo era una serpiente cuando tú eras mi amante, / yo era la serpiente más hermosa del Edén . . .*" ["To thee I come when the rest is over; / A snake was I when thou wast my lover. / I was the fairest snake in Eden . . . "] This is a bit terrible but it is lovely, because there must also be beauty in snakes. "*Pero me dieron nueva forma y fui una mujer para la nueva criatura del Cielo*" [". . . new form and feature / Made me a wife for the earth's new creature"], that is, for man. "*Tómame, cuando vuelvo de Adán . . .*" ["Take me thou as I come from Adam . . . "]. Because she does not hide from him that she is coming from Adam and that she has taken on the shape of a woman. She's a bit like a witch, according to the Jewish superstition about the witches of the night. "*De nuevo te subyugaré mi amor, el pasado ha pasado y yo vuelvo*" ["Once again shall my love subdue thee; / The past is past and I am come to thee"].

"O but Adam was thrall to Lilith!
(And O the bower and the hour!)
All the threads of my hair are golden,
And there in a net his heart was holden."

"*Pero Adán fue un vasallo para Lílith,*" and then it continues: "*Todas las hebras de mi pelo son de oro, / y en ese red estaba atado su coarazón.*"

"O and Lilith was queen of Adam!
(Eden bower's in flower.)
All the day and the night together
My breath could shake his soul like a feather."

And now . . . Lilith was "*la reina de Adán*," "*todo el día y toda la noche / podía mi respiración sacudir su alma como una pluma*."

"What great joys had Adam and Lilith!—
(And O the bower and the hour!)
Sweet close rings of the serpent's twining,
As heart in heart lay sighing and pining."

We can see Lilith's monstrous love in these lines and the following ones. The repetition of the refrain gives it a fatalistic tone.

"What bright babes had Lilith and Adam!—
(Eden bower's in flower.)
Shapes that coiled in the woods and waters,
Glittering sons and radiant daughters."

You can see that this poem has a lot in common with the other one, but there are aesthetic differences. Here, there is something ... the poem is somewhat obsessive, because this man was a touch mad when he imagined the love of the first man with a snake, there is something monstrous in, "What bright babes had Lilith and Adam!"

Now, there is another poem, also an erotic poem. I don't know what is going on today, but Rossetti liked such things. This poem is a poem about Helen of Troy.⁶ Now, Helen, as you know, was kidnapped by Paris. Then Paris takes her to Troy—Paris is the son of Priam, king of Troy—and this causes the Trojan War and the destruction of the city.

So, let us look at this poem. The first stanza says "*Helena, de origen celestial, reina de Esparta*" ["Heavenborn Helen, Sparta's queen"], and then "*O, ciudad de Troya*" ["O Troy Town!"] because as Rossetti tells this fable—this fable of the beginning of Prince Paris's love for Helen—he knows that the consequence of this love is the destruction of the city.

And in the poem he gives us both time frames simultaneously: the origins of love, of the love between Helen and Paris, and then the destruction of the city. It is as if the poem took place in eternity, as if the two things happened at once, even though they are separated by many years. Now, as far as the future, which for us is the past, this is between parentheses.

So, it begins like this:

*Helena, de origen celestial, reina de Esparta,
(¡o, ciudad de Troya!)
Tenía dos senos de resplandor celestial,
el sol y la luna del deseo del amor.*

[Heavenborn Helen, Sparta's queen,
(O Troy Town!)
Had two breasts of heavenly sheen,
The sun and moon of the heart's desire.]

And he already knows, he foresees what will happen one day and says: "*Troya ha caído, la alta Troya está en llamas.*" ["O Troy's down, / Tall Troy's on fire!"] Then Helen is alone and she kneels in front of Venus's shrine and offers her a cup that has been molded on her breasts, that is, in the shape of her breasts. Lugones takes up this theme in his poem called "The Unobtainable Cup," but in Lugones's poem, it is a sculptor who wants to create the perfect cup, and he can only do so when he uses the breasts of a damsel as a model.⁷ But here, Helen kneels in front of Venus, tells her she needs, she requires, love, and offers her that cup. And she explains why it is that shape, and she reminds her of that now long-gone day when Paris, who was a prince and a shepherd, had to give an apple to the most beautiful goddess. And there was Minerva, and there was Juno, and there was Venus. And he gave the cup to Venus.

And Helen asks Venus to give her Paris's love, and Venus tells her: "*Tú, que estás arrodillada ahí, haz que el amor te levante.*" ["There thou kneel'st for Love to lift!"] And then she says, "*Tu don ha sido aceptado.*" ["Thy gift hath grace!"] Then she calls her son, Eros—Cupid—and tells him to shoot an arrow. And that arrow travels far, to where Paris is sleeping, and pierces his heart; and he falls in love with Helen, whom he has never seen. And he says: "*Oh, abrazar su cabeza de oro.*" ["Oh to clasp her golden head!"] And the poem returns with the refrain: "*Troya ha caído, la alta Troya está en llamas.*" ["O Troy's down, / Tall Troy's on fire!"] That is, from the moment Paris falls in love with Helen, the future already exists, Troy is already in flames.

And now let us hear this poem with details I have surely forgotten. In this poem, the parentheses do not correspond to the thoughts of another person, but rather to what is fated to happen. It is called "Troy Town." This is a medieval expression. Today, nobody would say "Troy Town," but rather "the town of Troy." But in the Middle Ages, people said "Troy Town," and they also said it in French. And we have seen that in Anglo-Saxon, to say "London" they said *Londonburh*, and to say "Rome," *Romeburh*.⁸ This is an analogous form.

Now, Andrew Lang said that this ballad was not, obviously, a popular ballad, because Rossetti apparently did not intend it to be.⁹ It is a highbrow poem, an artificial poem in the best sense of the word.

[*A student begins to read the poem.*]

HEAVENBORN Helen, Sparta's queen,
(*O Troy Town!*)
Had two breasts of heavenly sheen,
The sun and moon of the heart's desire:
All Love's lordship lay between.
(*O Troy's down,*
Tall Troy's on fire!)

Helen knelt at Venus' shrine,
(*O Troy Town!*)
Saying, "A little gift is mine,
A little gift for a heart's desire.
Hear me speak and make me a sign!
(*O Troy's down,*
Tall Troy's on fire!)

When she says "*Óyeme hablar y hazme una seña!*" ["Hear me speak and make me a sign!"], the moment she says it, Troy has fallen, Troy is already on fire.

"Look, I bring thee a carven cup;
(*O Troy Town!*)
See it here as I hold it up,—
Shaped it is to the heart's desire,
Fit to fill when the gods would sup.
(*O Troy's down,*
Tall Troy's on fire!)

Helen to Venus: "*Te traigo una copa esculpida*" ["I bring thee a carven cup"] . . . "*digna de llenar el banquete de los dioses*" ["Fit to fill when the Gods would sup"].

"It was moulded like my breast;
(*O Troy Town!*)
He that sees it may not rest,
Rest at all for his heart's desire.
O give ear to my heart's behest!
(*O Troy's down,*
Tall Troy's on fire!)

"*No podrá escapar al anhelo de mi corazón.*" ["O give ear to my heart's behest!"] And the refrain: "*Troya en llamas.*"

“See my breast, how like it is;
(*O Troy Town!*)
See it bare for the air to kiss!
Is the cup to thy heart’s desire?
O for the breast, O make it his!
(*O Troy’s down,*
Tall Troy’s on fire!)

“Mira mi pecho, cómo se parece. Aquí está desnudo, para que el aire lo bese.” [“See my breast . . . bare for the air to kiss!”]

“Yea, for my bosom here I sue;
(*O Troy Town!*)
Thou must give it where ’tis due,
Give it there to the heart’s desire.
Whom do I give my bosom to?
(*O Troy’s down,*
Tall Troy’s on fire!)

“Each twin breast is an apple sweet.
(*O Troy Town!*)
Once an apple stirred the beat
Of thy heart with the heart’s desire:—
Say, who brought it then to thy feet?
(*O Troy’s down,*
Tall Troy’s on fire!)

“Oh, Troy Town, tienese que dármelo, porque me corresponde ...” [“(O Troy Town!) / Thou must give it where ’tis due”]. *“¿A quién le daré mi pecho?”* [“Whom do I give my bosom to?”] Because she still doesn’t know. And here comes the theme of the apple:

“They that claimed it then were three:
(*O Troy Town!*)

For thy sake two hearts did he
Make forlorn of the heart's desire.
Do for him as he did for thee!
(*O Troy's down,*
Tall Troy's on fire!)

"Los que pretendieron esta copa eran tres . . . " ["They that claimed it then were three . . . "] They are rivals, and only one will remain in the end. *"¿Por qué hay derecho de que dos corazones sean despojados del anhelo del amor?"* ["For thy sake two hearts did he / Make forlorn of the heart's desire."]

"Mine are apples grown to the south,
(*O Troy Town!*)
Grown to taste in the days of drouth,
Taste and waste to the heart's desire:
Mine are apples meet for his mouth."
(*O Troy's down,*
Tall Troy's on fire!)

"Las mías son manzanas que crecen hacia el sur, / para gustar en los días de la sequía. / Las mías son manzanas dignas de su boca."

Venus looked on Helen's gift,
(*O Troy Town!*)
Looked and smiled with subtle drift,
Saw the work of her heart's desire:—
"There thou kneel'st for Love to lift!"
(*O Troy's down,*
Tall Troy's on fire!)

Venus looked in Helen's face,
(*O Troy Town!*)
Knew far off an hour and place,

And fire lit from the heart's desire;
Laughed and said, "Thy gift hath grace!"
(*O Troy's down,*
Tall Troy's on fire!)

Cupid looked on Helen's breast,
(*O Troy Town!*)
Saw the heart within its nest,
Saw the flame of the heart's desire,—
Marked his arrow's burning crest.
(*O Troy's down,*
Tall Troy's on fire!)

Cupid took another dart,
(*O Troy Town!*)
Fledged it for another heart,
Winged the shaft with the heart's desire,
Drew the string and said, "Depart!"
(*O Troy's down,*
Tall Troy's on fire!)

Paris turned upon his bed,
(*O Troy Town!*)
Turned upon his bed and said,
Dead at heart with the heart's desire—
"Oh to clasp her golden head!"
(*O Troy's down,*
Tall Troy's on fire!)

In these lines, Helen is passionate, begging for love. Paris is asleep, but at the end it says: "*Oh, ¡quién pudiera abrazar su cabeza de oro!*" And then at the very end, the final refrain: "*O Troy's down, / Tall Troy's on fire!*"

In the next class we will talk about William Morris.

CLASS 22

THE LIFE OF WILLIAM MORRIS. THE THREE SUBJECTS WORTHY OF POETRY. KING ARTHUR AND THE MYTH OF THE RETURN OF THE HERO. MORRIS'S INTERESTS. MORRIS AND CHAUCER. "THE DEFENCE OF GUENEVERE."

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 7, 1966

Today we will talk about a colleague of Rossetti's who was also involved in the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. This is the poet William Morris. His dates are 1834 to 1896. He was good friends with Rossetti, Burne-Jones, Swinburne, Hunt, and other members of the group. Morris was essentially different from Rossetti. Their only similarity is that both were great poets. But Rossetti, as we have seen, was a neurotic man who led a tragic life; he was one to whom tragic events happened. It is enough to remember the suicide of his wife, his solitude at the end, his reclusion, and more to the point, his own suicide. It is also said that Rossetti never went to Italy—he insisted on being English—and that when speaking—never in writing—he commonly used cockney, London slang. Nevertheless, he felt confined in England, though in Italy, he would undoubtedly have felt exiled from London, a city he greatly loved.

On the other hand, Morris's life is that of an almost incredibly active man, a man interested in many things. Not in the way of a man like Goethe, for example, but rather, in a practical, active, even commercial way. If William Morris had not exercised the art of poetry, he would still be

remembered for his many and energetic activities in other fields.

“Morris” is a Welsh last name. This fact seems unimportant, but we will soon see that there is something paradoxical in this, for William Morris ended up writing in an almost purely Saxon English—within what was possible in the nineteenth century—and he introduced—or tried to introduce—Norse voices into the literary English of his era.

Morris belonged to what we would now call a middle-class family. He was born on the outskirts of London, he studied architecture and drawing, and then dedicated himself to painting. But Morris’s mind was too curious to stop for long on only one activity. He studied in Oxford, where he was a contributor to *Oxford’s Magazine*, publishing poems and stories.¹ According to Andrew Lang, the famous Scottish critic and Hellenist, these first creations, almost scribbled with his pen, written almost with indifference, as one who abandons himself to a pleasure rather than carries out a scrupulous labor, are among his most felicitous.² A bit later today we will look at some of them. I have brought a copy of his first book, *The Defence of Guenevere*.³ Guenevere—I suppose “Genoveva” would be another form of the name—is the wife of King Arthur, and her love affair with Sir Lancelot is what led Paolo and Francesca, in Dante’s imagination, to commit their sin. William Morris begins his poetry with the subject that in the Middle Ages was called *matière de Bretagne*. There are some verses by a French poet (whose name I have forgotten) that assert that there are three subjects worthy of poetry, and those subjects are: *la matière de France*—that is, the stories of Roland and Charlemagne and their peers, and the Battle of Roncevaux Pass.⁴ Then, *la matière de Bretagne*: the story of King Arthur, who fought against the Saxons at the beginning of the sixth century and to whom were compared many of Charlemagne’s great deeds, so that the King Arthur of legend became, like Charlemagne almost was, a universal

king of sorts. They also attribute to him the invention of the Round Table, a table that had no head, so there would be no hierarchy among those sitting around it, and that magically adapted to the number of diners: it shrank when there were six and could grow to comfortably accommodate over sixty knights. Also forming part of the legend of *matière de Bretagne* are the stories about the Holy Grail, that is, the cup that contained the wine Jesus drank during the last supper. And in that same cup—the word “grail” is related to the word “crater,” which is also a kind of cup—in that same cup, Joseph of Arimathea kept the blood of Christ.⁵ In other versions of the legend, the Grail is not a cup, it is a precious supernatural stone that the angels brought from heaven. The knights of King Arthur devote themselves to searching for the Holy Grail. Lancelot could have found that cup, but he did not deserve to find it because he had sinned with the wife of the king. And so it is that a son of his, Sir Galahad, the *Galeotto* from Dante’s famous verses, is the one who finally possesses the cup.⁶ As for King Arthur, he is said to have fought twelve battles against the Saxons, and he was defeated in the last one. This inevitably led in the nineteenth century to King Arthur being identified with a sun myth: twelve is the number of months. And in the last battle he was defeated, wounded, and taken by three women in mourning in a black skiff to the magical island of Avalon; and for a long time it was believed that he would return to rescue his people.⁷ The same was said in Norway about Olaf, who was called *Rex perpetuus Norvegiae*.⁸ The same belief about a king returning can be found in Portugal. There the personage is King Don Sebastian, defeated by the Moors in the Battle of Alcácer Quibir, and who will one day return.⁹ And it is curious that this mystical belief, the *sebastianismo*, the idea that a king will return, can also be found in Brazil: at the end of the nineteenth century there was someone named Antônio Conselheiro among the

“*jagunços*,” the cowboys of the north of Brazil, who also said that Sebastian would return.^{[10](#)}

All of this, the *matière de Bretagne*, comprises a collection of legends that were not unknown to Shakespeare and were used by William Morris and his illustrious contemporary, Tennyson—Browning’s friend—about whom we will not have time to talk.

There was a third subject allowed to poets of the Middle Ages. The French poet’s line says “*de France, de Bretagne et de Rome la grant*.”^{[11](#)} But the material of Rome was not just Roman history, but also—because Aeneas was Trojan—the story of Troy, and the story of Alexander the Great. Alexander the Great is said to have had the desire to conquer paradise, after having conquered Earth. And in the legend, Alexander arrives at a high wall, and from the wall he drops one speck of dust. Then Alexander understands that he is that speck of dust, the material to which he will be reduced in the end, and he gives up the conquest of paradise. This is like the six feet of earth the Saxon king promises to the Norwegian king in the Battle of Stamford Bridge.^{[12](#)}

But let us return to William Morris. Morris lived in the Victorian era, during what was called the Industrial Revolution. That included, partially, the disappearance of the crafts and their replacement by factory products. This worried William Morris, the idea that craftsmanship—that is, what is made with love—could be lost and replaced by the impersonal, commercial products of the factories. It’s interesting that the English government was also worried about this. We see this in the case of Lockwood Kipling—Kipling’s father and a friend of Burne-Jones and William Morris—whom the British government sent to India to defend Hindu crafts from the inundation of commercial products from England itself.^{[13](#)} Lockwood Kipling was also an excellent draftsman.

Morris was interested in the crafts and the guilds. Not so that the workers could earn more—though he was interested in that as well—but in the sense that the workers were personally interested in their labor and carried out some kind of work of love. And so William Morris was one of the fathers of socialism in England and one of the first members of the Fabian Society, to which Bernard Shaw, who was one of his disciples, belonged. The society took that name because during the Punic Wars there was a Roman general who was given the name Fabius Cunctator, “Fabius the Delayer,” for he believed that the best way to defeat the enemies of the fatherland was like our Montoneros when they fought against the generals of independence, or what the guerrillas do, or the Boers in South Africa.¹⁴ That is, not to engage in battle but rather to tire out the organized armies against whom they are fighting, by leading them from one place to another—tiring them out, leading them to places with bad pasture for horses, which is what the Irish did to Essex.¹⁵ So this socialist society is founded in London, because the members of that society did not believe in revolution, they believed that socialism should be imposed bit by bit, without forcing events.

In a way, this is what has happened. I was in London a few years ago. I had to have a small operation, and when I asked the doctor about his fee, he answered that I had to sign a document, that was all, that he was a doctor responsible for attending to, and if necessary, operating on, people who needed him within a certain area of London. And he told me that he was an employee of the government, so I had only to pay for the medicine. A poor man can be treated by the king’s surgeon.

So we have Morris as a socialist, as one of the father’s of English socialism. Moreover, he often spoke in Hyde Park to convince people of the advantages of socialism. His biographers say that he did so with very little tact, that he once engaged a worker in conversation and said to him, “I

have been raised and born a gentleman. But now, as you can see, I converse with people from every class.” Which couldn’t have been very flattering to his interlocutor.

Morris was—I will say in passing—a robust man, with a red beard; and someone once asked him if he was Captain So-and-so, the captain of a ship called, poetically, *Sirena*. He liked very much that he would be taken for the captain of a ship. And Morris was interested in design, the arts of carpentry and cabinetmaking, and he founded a company for the decorative arts—Morris & Marshall—for decorating houses. Still, in England, you can find “Morris chairs,” which were designed and even made by him, because he was interested in manual labor; he liked it.¹⁶ Being a writer, he was also interested in typography and founded the Kelmscott Press.¹⁷ At home I have a few volumes from Saga Library, which he founded, which published his translations of the Icelandic sagas done by him in collaboration with Eiríkr Magnússon, which he translated into a slightly archaic English.¹⁸ Then he also published an edition of Chaucer.¹⁹ Chaucer was one of his idols. There is a book of his dedicated to Chaucer. He says to his book that if he met Chaucer in person—he speaks to his book, as Ovid did to some of his—he should greet him by name and tell him, “O, master, who is great of heart and tongue.”²⁰ He came to feel he had a kind of personal friendship with Chaucer.

So, there is Morris as a political innovator—socialism was a novelty at the time—and as an innovator in design and the decorative arts—he built and designed many houses, including his own house, “the red house,” built in the outskirts of London, near the Thames. And then he also became interested in typography, and created what are called “font families.” He drew Latin letters and Gothic letters, which in English are instead called “black letters.” And in spite of being an essentially modern man, he felt passionate about the Middle Ages. He was interested in medieval musical instruments—the kinds of instruments I

believe Morpurgo has a collection of in Buenos Aires—and when Morris was dying he asked them to play old medieval English music on those instruments.^{[21](#)}

One of the people who loved him most was the then young Bernard Shaw, a man who had no great passion for friendships. When William Morris died, honored and famous in the year 1896, Bernard Shaw published an article that has been preserved, in which he said the opposite of what all his contemporaries did, which was that England and the world had lost a great man; he wrote that a man like Morris could not be lost after his death, that Morris's physical death was an accident, that Morris continued being a friend to him, a living person.

There is one event in Morris's life that should be mentioned, and this is a trip he took, I believe around 1870—I have a poor memory for dates—a trip to Iceland.^{[22](#)} Or rather, he went on a pilgrimage to Iceland. His friends suggested a trip to Rome, and he said that “there is nothing in Rome that I cannot see in London, but I want to make a pilgrimage to Iceland.” Because he believed that the Germanic culture—the culture, let us say, of Germany, the Low Countries, Austria, Scandinavia, England, the Flemish part of Belgium—had reached its peak in Iceland, and that he, as an Englishman, had a duty to make a pilgrimage to that small lost island, almost inside the Arctic Circle, that island that had produced such admirable prose and such admirable poetry.

I think that now a trip to Iceland is not something particularly heroic; it is a country commonly visited by tourists. But this was not the case at the time, and Morris had to travel by horse through the mountainous regions. Morris drank tea made with the water of the geysers, those tall columns of thermal water they have in Iceland. And Morris visited, for example, the place where the fugitive Grettir had hid out, and all the other places celebrated in the historical sagas of Iceland.^{[23](#)} Morris also translated

Beowulf into English.²⁴ Andrew Lang wrote that the translation deserved a reader's curiosity, for it was written in an English that was slightly more archaic than the Anglo-Saxon of the eighth century. Morris also wrote a poem, *Sigurd the Volsung*, in which he uses the plot of the *Völsungasaga*, the plot that Wagner used for his musical dramas, *The Ring of the Nibelung*.²⁵

Rossetti, who was not at all interested in anything Norse or Germanic, said he could not be interested in the story of a man who was brother to a dragon, and refused to read the book. This did not stop Morris from continuing to be his friend, though Morris sometimes had a violent temper. I said before that Morris began writing poetry as a hobby, and he published stories and then long novels written in lazy prose, novels whose titles are themselves poems: *The Wood at the World's End*, *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, etcetera.²⁶ And in addition to the purely fantastical books, which take place in a vague prehistoric era that is, of course, Germanic, he wrote two novels to convert people to socialism. One was *John Ball's Dream*.²⁷ John Ball was a companion of Tyler, one of the leaders in the fourteenth century of a rebellion of serfs (the peasants of England) in which they even burned down palaces and the archbishops' residences.²⁸ So the dream of John Ball is that of England, what this rebel from the fourteenth century might have dreamed. The other book is *News from Nowhere*.²⁹ "Nowhere" is the Saxon word for "utopia," and it means the same thing, that it is nowhere. In *News from Nowhere*, Morris writes, according to what he believed at the time, about the happy world a universal socialist regime would bring about. In addition to his oil paintings, which have been preserved, he did wood engravings and many drawings; and he built and furnished many houses. He carried on a kind of superhuman level of activity.³⁰ And commercially he also did well, because he was a good businessman. That is the

opposite of Rossetti, who was as if lost in the inferno of London, as Chesterton said.

Morris published his first poems in the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, a magazine written by students and for students. One of his classmates heard those poems and said, “Topsy”—because that is what his friends called him, I don’t know why—“you are a great poet.”³¹ And he said, “Well, if what I write is poetry, then it is easy, I have only to think about it and let the poems write themselves.” And his whole life he maintained this marvelous ease. It is said that one day—I’m going to check the date—he wrote four or five hundred rhymed couplets.

At the time he was writing *The Earthly Paradise*, which is perhaps his most important work, and the epic poem, *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung*, he was writing hundreds of lines of poetry every day.³² At night, he would sit with his family and read to them out loud and accept corrections, the changes they suggested, and the next day he would continue his work, and at the same time he was also involved in weaving tapestries. He said that a man who was unable to weave with one hand and write an epic with the other could devote himself neither to making tapestries nor to poetry. And it seems this was not merely a boast but rather a fact.

Let us now take a look at an episode that I will recount from his first book, undoubtedly changing it in the telling.³³ Andrew Lang said of this episode that it had a certain *bizarrerie*, a French word that is difficult to translate and was new in the English language. This reminds us of the generous letter that Victor Hugo wrote to Baudelaire when he published *Les Fleurs du Mal*: “You have given new worth to the sky of art.” And Andrew Lang said something similar about Morris’s first poems.

In this poem, Morris supposes—imagines—a medieval knight. This knight is dying; he has closed his eyes in his large bed, and at the foot of the bed is a window. Through

this window he sees his river and the forest, his forest. And suddenly he knows he must open his eyes, so he opens them and sees “a great God’s angel.” And this powerful angel, this great emanation, is standing in the light, and the light illuminates him and makes his words seem like commands from God. The angel has in his hand two cloths, each on a wand. And one of the cloths, more vibrantly colored, is red, scarlet. And the other is a little less bright, it is long and blue. The angel says to the dying man that he must choose one of the two. The poem tells us that “no man could tell the better of the two.” And the angel tells him that his immortal destiny depends on his choice, that he cannot make a mistake. If he chooses “the wrong colour,” he will go to hell, and if he chooses the correct one, he will go to heaven. The man waits for half an hour. He knows that his fate depends on this whim, this act that seems capricious, and after trembling for half an hour he says, “May God help me, blue is the color of heaven.” And the angel says, “Red,” and the man knows that he has been condemned forever. Then he says to all men, to the living and the dead, because he is alone with the angel, “*¡Cristo! Si yo lo hubiera sabido, sabido, sabido . . .*” “Ah Christ! if only I had known, known, known . . .” And it is understood that he dies and his soul goes to hell. That is, he loses his soul, as the human race is lost, because Adam and Eve ate from the lost fruit of the mysterious garden.

And now that I have told it—and I did this not because I think I can do it better than the text, but rather so you can follow it better—I will ask one of you to read this passage of the poem. The last time we had an excellent reader, I hope she is here, or perhaps somebody else would like to take her place. And as for the reading, I ask only that it be read slowly, expressively, so you can follow the words and hear the music, which is so important in this poem.

So, I have dared to talk this whole time, which one of you now dares?

[A student comes to the front of the class.]

Now let us watch the death of a medieval knight.

[A student begins to read.]

But, knowing now that they would have her speak,
She threw her wet hair backward from her brow,
Her hand close to her mouth touching her cheek,

As though she had had there a shameful blow,
And feeling it shameful to feel ought but shame
All through her heart, yet felt her cheek burned so,

She must a little touch it; like one lame
She walked away from Gauwaine, with her head
Still lifted up; and on her cheek of flame

The tears dried quick; she stopped at last and said:
“O knights and lords, it seems but little skill
To talk of well-known things past now and dead.

“God wot I ought to say, I have done ill,
And pray you all forgiveness heartily!
Because you must be right such great lords—still

“Listen, suppose your time were come to die,
And you were quite alone and very weak;
Yea, laid a dying while very mightily.

“The wind was ruffling up the narrow streak
Of river through your broad lands running well:
Suppose a hush should come, then some one speak:

““One of these cloths is heaven, and one is hell,
Now choose one cloth for ever, which they be,
I will not tell you, you must somehow tell.””

Or, rather:

[Here Borges translates the sixth and seventh stanzas, and he translates various lines below.]

*“Oye, supón que ha llegado la hora de tu muerte,
y tú estuvieras muy solo y muy débil;
y estarías muriendo mientras*

*el viento está agitando la alameda, está agitando
la corriente del río que atraviesa bien tus amplias
tierras;
imagínate que hubiera un silencio,*

“Hush” is a difficult word to translate—

y que entonces alguien hablaría.

Excuse me, I was wrong: the angel speaks before he is seen by the dying man.

*Una de las telas es el Cielo, y la otra el Infierno,
elige para siempre un color, cualquiera de los dos,
yo no te lo dire, tú de algún modo tienes que decirlo.*

[*The student continues reading.*]

“Of your own strength and mightiness; here, see!’
Yea, yea, my lord, and you to ope your eyes,
At foot of your familiar bed to see

“A great God’s angel standing, with such dyes,
Not known on earth, on his great wings, and hands,
Held out two ways, light from the inner skies

“Showing him well, and making his commands

Seem to be God's commands, moreover, too,
Holding within his hands the cloths on wands;

"And one of these strange choosing cloths was blue,
Wavy and long, and one cut short and red;
No man could tell the better of the two.

"After a shivering half-hour you said,
'God help! heaven's colour, the blue'; and he said,
'hell.'
Perhaps you then would roll upon your bed,

"And cry to all good men that loved you well,
'Ah Christ! if only I had known, known, known';
Launcelot went away, then I could tell,

"Like wisest man how all things would be, moan,
And roll and hurt myself, and long to die,
And yet fear much to die for what was sown."

In other words:

*"Tú tienes que decirlo sabiéndolo por tu propia fuerza
y por tu propio poderío,
Sí, sí, mi señor—Morris uses archaic words—que tú
abrieras los ojos
y al pie de tu cama familiar verías*

*un gran angel de Dios de pie, y con tales matices
desconocidos en la Tierra en sus grandes alas y
manos"*

The angel is very real and very strong.

*“Y los brazos extendidos, y la luz desde los cielos
ulteriores mostrándolo bien.”*

The angel is not nebulous, but rather extremely vivid.

*“Y eso hacía que sus órdenes parecieran de Dios
Y teniendo en sus manos la telas sobre varas*

*Y una de esas extrañas telas para elegir era azul,
ondeada y larga y la otra breve y roja”*

He gives the more vivid color to the cloth that is shorter, for balance.

“Nadie podía decir cuál era la mayor de las dos.”

Then, after half an hour, more than shaking—shivering—he says:

*“Dios me salve, el color del cielo es el azul.”
Y el angel dice: ‘Infierno.’
Entonces tú te revolverías sobre tu lecho,*

*Y dirías, invitarías a todos los hombres buenos que te
quieren:*

“Ah, Christ! If only I had known, known, known.”

Here, the final syllables are slightly stressed, as they are in Rossetti.

In the next class, we will look at Morris’s most important books, *The Earthly Paradise*, among others.

CLASS 23

"THE TUNE OF THE SEVEN TOWERS," "THE SAILING OF THE SWORD," AND THE EARTHLY PARADISE, BY WILLIAM MORRIS. THE ICELANDIC SAGAS. THE STORY OF GUNNAR.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 9, 1966

Let us continue today with our discussion of the work of William Morris. Now, before considering his two greatest works, we could read some of the poems in his first book, *The Defence of Guenevere*.

Would any of you like to continue as we did in the last class, and rather than read a fragment, read a short poem from the book?

We can look at a poem called "The Tune of Seven Towers."¹ It is a transparent poem, essentially musical, though it does have a plot. There is a woman we can assume to be very beautiful called "fair Yoland of the flowers," "*la hermosa Yolanda de las flores*," who leads knights—all of this occurs in some kind of vaguely medieval era—to a castle where they die; she kills them, undoubtedly using magic.

[A student comes to the front of the class and begins to read the poem.]

No one goes there now:
For what is left to fetch away
From the desolate battlements all arow,
And the lead roof heavy and grey?
"Therefore," said fair Yoland of the flowers,

"This is the tune of Seven Towers."

No one walks there now;
Except in the white moonlight
The white ghosts walk in a row;
If one could see it, an awful sight,
"Listen!" said fair Yoland of the flowers,
"This is the tune of Seven Towers."

But none can see them now,
Though they sit by the side of the moat,
Feet half in the water, there in a row,
Long hair in the wind afloat.
"Therefore," said fair Yoland of the flowers,
"This is the tune of Seven Towers."

If any will go to it now,
He must go to it all alone,
Its gates will not open to any row
Of glittering spears—will you go alone?
"Listen!" said fair Yoland of the flowers,
"This is the tune of Seven Towers."

The stanzas end with the refrain, "'This is the tune of the Seven Towers.'" It is an almost purely musical and ornamental poem: *"'Oíd,' dijo la Hermosa Yolanda de las flores, 'ésta es la melodía de las siete torres.'"* [*"'Listen!' said fair Yoland of the flowers, / 'This is the tune of Seven Towers.'"*] But at the same time, there is something ominous and terrible. The sorceress suggests the knight come alone, to die.

By my love go there now,
To fetch me my coif away,
My coif and my kirtle, with pearls arow,
Oliver, go today!

*"Therefore," said fair Yoland of the flowers,
"This is the tune of Seven Towers."*

I am unhappy now,
I cannot tell you why;
If you go, the priests and I in a row
Will pray that you may not die.
*"Listen!" said fair Yoland of the flowers,
"This is the tune of Seven Towers."*

If you will go for me now,
I will kiss your mouth at last;
[She sayeth inwardly]
(The graves stand grey in a row.)
Oliver, hold me fast!
*"Therefore," said fair Yoland of the flowers,
"This is the tune of Seven Towers."*

These poems were written in Morris's youth. Soon, we will look at his mature works, *The Earthly Paradise* (a cycle of stories), and an epic poem, *Sigurd the Volsung*. But he wrote these later—one from the year 1868 to 1870, and the other in the year 1876. Then came other less important poems, to convert people to socialism.

We will now read another poem, "The Sailing of the Sword."² *The Sword* is a ship carrying three warriors—I believe, to the Crusades—who leave behind three sisters and tell them they will return. There is a theme that repeats itself, a line: "When the Sword went out to sea." There is alliteration. One of the sisters speaks. She has been abandoned, because I can tell you now that the knight will return, but with a splendid woman by his side.

[*The student reads the poem.*]

Across the empty garden-beds,
When the Sword went out to sea,

I scarcely saw my sisters' heads
Bowed each beside a tree.
I could not see the castle leads,
When the Sword went out to sea,

Alicia wore a scarlet gown,
When the Sword went out to sea,
But Ursula's was russet brown:
For the mist we could not see
The scarlet roofs of the good town,
When the Sword went out to sea.

Green holly in Alicia's hand,
When the Sword went out to sea;
With sere oak-leaves did Ursula stand;
O! yet alas for me!
I did but bear a peel'd white wand,
When the Sword went out to sea.

O, russet brown and scarlet bright,
When the Sword went out to sea,
My sisters wore; I wore but white:
Red, brown, and white, are three;
Three damozels; each had a knight,
When the Sword went out to sea.

Sir Robert shouted loud, and said:
When the Sword went out to sea,
Alicia, while I see thy head,
What shall I bring for thee?
O, my sweet Lord, a ruby red:
The Sword went out to sea.

Sir Miles said, while the sails hung down,
When the Sword went out to sea,
O, Ursula! while I see the town,

What shall I bring for thee?
Dear knight, bring back a falcon brown:
The Sword went out to sea.

But my Roland, no word he said
When the Sword went out to sea,
But only turn'd away his head;
A quick shriek came from me:
Come back, dear lord, to your white maid.
The Sword went out to sea.

The hot sun bit the garden-beds
When the Sword came back from sea;
Beneath an apple-tree our heads
Stretched out toward the sea;
Grey gleam'd the thirsty castle-leads,
When the Sword came back from sea.

Lord Robert brought a ruby red,
When the Sword came back from sea;
He kissed Alicia on the head:
I am come back to thee;
'Tis time, sweet love, that we were wed,
Now the Sword is back from sea!

Sir Miles he bore a falcon brown,
When the Sword came back from sea;
His arms went round tall Ursula's gown:
What joy, O love, but thee?
Let us be wed in the good town,
Now the Sword is back from sea!

My heart grew sick, no more afraid,
When the Sword came back from sea;
Upon the deck a tall white maid
Sat on Lord Roland's knee;

His chin was press'd upon her head,
When the Sword came back from sea!

The two older sisters receive a gift, and as the stanzas continue, we see that Lord Roland is beginning to forget her. The first is dressed in red. The next in brown. This foreshadows or predicts that something is going to happen. The name of the ship is *The Sword*. At the end, when Roland returns, he returns with a white maiden. And the narrator was dressed in white at the beginning. You can see that this poem is like a painting, in addition to the music of the lines.

Well, as you can see, Morris began by writing visual, musical, and vaguely medieval poems. But then the years passed; he devoted himself to his other activities: architecture, design, typography; and he planned out his great work. And that great work—I think it is his most important work—is called *The Earthly Paradise*, and was published in two or three volumes from the year 1868 to 1870. Now, Morris had always been interested in stories, but he believed that the best stories had already been invented, that a writer did not have to invent *new* stories. That the true work of the poet—and he had an epic sense of poetry—was to repeat or re-create these ancient stories. This might seem strange to us as far as literature goes, but painters never thought so. We could almost say that for centuries painters have repeatedly painted the same stories, the story of the Passion, for example. How many crucifixions are there in painting? And as for sculpture, it is exactly the same. How many sculptors have made equestrian statues? And the story of the Trojan War has been retold many times, and the *Metamorphosis* of Ovid retells myths that readers already knew. And Morris, around the middle of the nineteenth century, thought that the essential stories already existed and that his task was to re-imagine them, re-create them, tell them anew. Moreover, he admired Chaucer, who had not invented plots, either, but rather took Italian, French, and Latin ones, as well as some from unknown sources but that

undoubtedly existed, like the story of the man who sells pardons. So, Morris set himself the task of writing a series of stories like *The Canterbury Tales*, and he placed them in the same era, the fourteenth century. Now, this book, which consists of twenty-four stories and which Morris managed to finish in three years, is written in imitation of Chaucer. But at the same time—and this is something the critics seem not to have noticed—as a kind of challenge to Chaucer, not only in terms of the sources but also in terms of the language. Because, as you know, Chaucer looks for an English that abounds in Latin words. This intention of his is logical, for with the Norman invasion England became full of Latin words. Morris, on the other hand—Morris, who translated *Beowulf*—was falling in love with Old Norse literature, and wanted English to return, to whatever degree possible, to its primitive Germanic roots. So he writes *The Earthly Paradise*.

I think that Chaucer could have done something similar if he had wanted to, but Chaucer was drawn to the south—to the Mediterranean, to the Latin tradition, a tradition that Morris certainly did not scorn, for half the stories in *The Earthly Paradise* are Hellenic. There are eleven of Hellenic origin, and another that is Arabic. Morris took that one from the medieval book *A Thousand and One Nights*, which was compiled in Egypt, though its sources (Hindu and Persian) are much older. Chaucer found a framework for his stories, the idea of the famous pilgrimage to Becket's shrine, and Morris needed a framework, a pretext to tell a lot of stories. So he invented a story, a more romantic story than, let's say, Chaucer's. Because between Chaucer in the fourteenth century and Morris in the nineteenth century, many things had happened, among them the romantic movement. Moreover, England had rediscovered its Germanic roots, which it had forgotten. I think Carlyle, when talking about Shakespeare, calls him "our Saxon William." This would have surprised Shakespeare, for Shakespeare never thought about England's Saxon roots. When Shakespeare thought about

England's past, he thought instead about English history after the Norman conquest, or in England's Celtic past. And even when he wrote *Hamlet*, he felt so distant from all of that, that except for Yorick, the jester—existing eternally in that dialogue with Hamlet and the skull—and the two courtesans, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, all of it comes from other countries. The soldiers who appear in the first scene of *Hamlet* have Spanish names, Francisco and Bernardo. Hamlet's beloved is Ophelia; her brother is Laertes, the name of Ulysses's father. That is, the Germanic was far away from Shakespeare. Though undoubtedly it was in his blood, and in a large part of his vocabulary, but he was not conscious of it. He found almost all his plots in Greece, Rome; for *Macbeth*, he looked to Scotland; for *Hamlet*, he found it in a Danish story. Morris, on the other hand, was very conscious of the Germanic, and above all, of the Norse aspects of the English past. And so he invented this plot. He takes the fourteenth century—Chaucer's era—and in that era, there is a plague that is sweeping through Europe and especially through England: the Black Plague. So he imagines a group of knights who want to flee death. Among them is a Breton; there is also a Norwegian, and a German knight—though the German knight dies before the end of the adventure. These knights decide to look for the Earthly Paradise, the paradise of immortal men. The Earthly Paradise was usually situated—there is an Anglo-Saxon poem with this title—in the Orient.³ But the Celts had situated it in the West, toward the setting sun, in the confines of the unknown seas bordering on America, which had yet to be discovered. The Celts imagined all kinds of marvels: for example, islands where bronze hounds chased deer of silver or gold; islands over which a river hung like a rainbow, a river that never emptied, with ships and fish; islands surrounded by walls of fire; and one of these islands was the Earthly Paradise.

Those knights of the fourteenth century decide to look for the blessed islands, the islands of the Earthly Paradise, and they leave London. And when they leave London, they

pass through customs, and at customs, there is a man who is writing. And we are not told his name, but we are led to understand that this man is Chaucer, who was a custom's agent. So Chaucer appears silently in the poem, like Shakespeare, who appears and does not say a word in the novel *Orlando*, by Virginia Woolf. In that novel there is a party in a palace, and there is a man watching and observing everything and saying nothing. Both Morris and Virginia Woolf felt incapable of inventing words worthy of putting in the mouths of Chaucer or Shakespeare.

Then the ship carrying the adventurers puts out to sea, and they pass another ship. In that ship is a king, one of the kings of England who is going to fight against France in the long Hundred Years' War. And the king invites the knights to board his ship, where he is on deck, and he is surrounded by the knights, alone and unarmed. He asks them who they are. One says he is Breton, the other that he is Norwegian, and the king asks them what they are searching for, and they tell him they are searching for immortality. The king does not think this adventure is absurd. The king believes an Earthly Paradise might exist, but at the same time he understands that he is an old man, that his fate is not immortality but rather battle and death. And so he wishes them good luck, he tells them that their fate is better than his, that the only thing left for him is to die "within the four walls of some battlefield."⁴ He tells them to carry on. Then he thinks that although he is a king and they are strangers, they—perhaps this fits the beliefs of the time—would become immortal. "And maybe," he says, "it could come to pass that I, a king, will be remembered for only one thing; I will be remembered because one morning, before you crossed the sea, you spoke to me." Then he thinks that, in spite of the fact that they most probably will become immortal, and he will be forgotten and will die like all kings and all men, he must give them something. It is a way of showing his superiority. He is a king. He gives one of them, the Breton, a horn, and he says, "So that you will remember this morning. And you,

Norwegian, I give you this ring, so you will remember me, for I am of Odin's blood." ⁵ Because, as you will remember, the kings of England believed they were descended from Odin.

Then they take leave of the king and start on their journey. The journey lasts many years. The seafarers land on marvelous islands, but they age. Then they come to an unknown city on an island, where they remain till the end of their days. That island is inhabited by Greeks who have preserved the cult of the old gods. The father of the Norwegian knows Greek because he was a member of the Scandinavian guard of the Byzantine emperor—that famous guard of the Byzantine emperors, made up of Swedes, Norwegians, and Danes that many Saxons joined after the Norman invasion of England in the year 1066. ⁶ It is strange to think that familiar languages were spoken in the streets of Constantinople. In the streets of Constantinople, ancient Danish was spoken and, around the middle of the eleventh century, Anglo-Saxon.

The city on the island is governed by Greeks. They warmly welcome the travelers, and here we have the framework Morris needed: the elders of the city suggest to the seafarers that they should all meet twice a month and tell each other stories. The stories the islanders tell are all Greek myths. There are the stories of Eros, of Perseus, all taken from Greek mythology. And the others tell stories of different origins, among them an Icelandic story that Morris translated into English. It is called "The Lovers of Gudrun." There is an Arabic story, a story the father of the Norwegian told him, taken from *A Thousand and One Nights*. There are other Scandinavian and Persian stories. In this way, in a year, twenty-four stories are told. Morris took his meter from Chaucer. There are also, as in Chaucer, intervals between the twelve stories of the seafarers and the twelve stories of the Greeks. In these intervals, the changes of the seasons are described, and by the use of a convention—Morris was not looking for realism, of course—the landscapes described

are the landscapes of England in the spring, summer, fall, and winter.

At the end, the poet speaks, and the poet says that although he has told these stories, they are not his, but that he has re-created them for his time and that, probably, others will tell them after him as they were told before him. Then he says that he cannot sing about heaven or hell—he was probably thinking about Dante when he said that—that he cannot make death seem like a trivial thing, that he cannot stop the passage of time, that it will sweep him away as it will sweep away the readers.⁷ We can see he has no faith in the next world. He says that he is simply “*el ocioso cantor de un día vacío*.” [“The idle singer on an empty day.”] Then he speaks to his book, and he tells the book that if it should ever find Chaucer, that it should greet him and in his name say: “*¡Oh, tú, grande de lengua y de corazón!*” [“O thou great of heart and tongue . . . ”].⁸ And so the book ends on a melancholy note.

This book is full of fantastical inventions. There is a witches’ Sabbath, for example, and there is the king of the demons, who rides on a horse of sculpted and ever-changing fire, so that at every moment the features of the king and his horse have a precise shape, but this shape lasts only an instant.⁹

Before publishing this book, Morris published another long poem titled *The Life and Death of Jason*.¹⁰ I’m convinced it must have originally been one of the Greek stories of *The Earthly Paradise*, but the story was so long Morris published it separately. One of the most notable features of this poem that came before *The Earthly Paradise* is that the centaurs of Thessaly appear on the first pages. It seems impossible to us that a poet of the nineteenth century would talk about centaurs, because we and he don’t believe in centaurs.

It is extraordinary to see how Morris prepares the way for the centaur. First he talks about the forest of Thessaly,

then he talks about the lions and wolves of this forest, and then he tells us that the quick-eyed centaurs shoot their arrows there.¹¹ He begins with the part of the body where life is most apparent, the eyes.¹² Then we have a slave who awaits a centaur. And in the same way that Dante in *The Divine Comedy* shows himself tremulous—not because he is a coward but because he must communicate to his readers that hell is a terrible place—the slave feels a kind of horror when, in the middle of the forest—a dense forest—he hears the hoofs of a centaur approaching him.¹³ Then the centaur approaches and Morris describes him with a wreath of flowers around the part of his body where the human ends and the equine begins.¹⁴ Morris does not tell us that the slave feels this is terrible, but he shows the slave falling to his knees in front of the monster.¹⁵ Then the centaur speaks, speaks with human words, and the slave feels this is terrible, too, because the centaur is half man, half horse. In this long poem, which ends with the death of Medea, everything is told in a way that, while we read the poem, we believe in it, or, as Coleridge would say when speaking about Shakespeare's drama, there is a "willing suspension of disbelief."

From 1868 to 1870, Morris publishes his *The Earthly Paradise*. This poem is recognized by all his contemporaries—even those who were not close to him—as a great poem. But he, in the meantime, had started a saga library. These are "novels" written for the most part in Iceland during the Middle Ages. Morris became friends with an Icelandic, Eiríkr Magnússon, and between the two they translated various parts of the "novels." This would later be done in the Scandinavian countries and in Germany. In Germany, there is a famous collection, the Thule Library, the name the Romans gave some islands that have been identified as the Shetland Islands, but that usually are identified with Iceland. Morris embarks on his pilgrimage to Iceland and translates great poems into English, and among these poems is the

Odyssey. I will recall the first two lines of Pope's *Odyssey* and the first of Morris's. Pope used a Latinate English, a sonorous English, and the lines are as follows:

The man, for wisdom's various arts renown'd,
Long exercis'd in woes, oh muse! resound . . .

*Al hombre famoso por las diversas artes de la
sabiduría,
Largamente ejercitado en pesares, ¡oh musa,
resuena!, ¡oh musa, canta!*

Morris wanted to limit his vocabulary as far as possible to Germanic words. So, besides the word "muse," which he had to keep, we have these strange lines:

Tell me, O Muse, of the shifty, the man who wandered
afar,
After the Holy Burg, Troy-town, he had wasted with war
...

*Hábleme musa del astuto, el hombre que erró muy
lejos,
después de haber destrozado con Guerra la ciudadela
sagrada.*

Morris also translated the *Aeneid* and *Beowulf*. He translated the sagas. His versions of the sagas are admirable. In his version of the *Odyssey*, we feel a certain incongruity between the fact that Morris is translating a Greek epic poem and the Germanic English he uses. On the other hand, we feel no incongruity in Morris's use of Germanic words to translate Old Norse stories and "novels."

I would like to recall one episode from the sagas. The word "saga" is related to *sagen*, "to say," in German. They are stories, tales. They started out as oral and were later

written down, but because they were originally oral, the narrator was forbidden to enter into the mind of the heroes. He could not recount what a hero dreamed; he could not say that a person hated or loved: this would be to intrude upon the mind of the character. Only what the characters did or what they made could be told. The sagas are told as if they are real, and if they abound in fantastical elements it is because the narrators and listeners believed in them. In the sagas, there are fifty or sixty characters, all historical, characters who lived and died in Iceland and were famous for their bravery or for their personalities. The episode that I will recount is this: there is a very beautiful woman, with long, blonde hair that reaches down to her waist.¹⁶ That woman performs a vile act and her husband slaps her. The narrator does not tell us what she feels, because that is forbidden by the rules of his art. And then two or three hundred pages go by, and we have forgotten about the slap. And the husband who slapped her has also forgotten. And then he is under siege in his house, and being attacked. And the first attacker manages to climb the tower. And Gunnar, the husband, kills him from inside, he wounds him with a lance. The man falls to the ground, and his companions surround him. We don't know anything about this man, but one of his companions asks him, "Is Gunnar in the house?" And the man—this shows us he is courageous—dies with a joke on his lips. He says, "I don't know about him, but his lance is," and he dies with this joke. Then the others surround the house and continue attacking Gunnar, who defends himself with arrows. He is with his dog and his wife. The others in his house have all been killed. But he continues defending himself with arrows, and one of the arrows of those surrounding the house breaks the cord of Gunnar's bow. Gunnar needs another cord, he needs it immediately, and he asks his wife—much has been mentioned about her long blonde hair—that she weave him a cord with her hair.¹⁷

[The original transcription of the class ends here.
Probably Borges's final words were not taped.]

CLASS 24

THE STORY OF SIGURD THE VOLSUNG, BY WILLIAM MORRIS. THE LIFE OF ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON.

[PROBABLY] MONDAY, DECEMBER 12, 1966

In literary histories and biographies of Morris, one learns that Morris's most important work was *Sigurd the Volsung*.¹ This book is longer than *Beowulf*, and was published in 1876. At that time the novel was considered the most popular genre of literature. The idea of writing an epic poem in the middle of the nineteenth century was audacious. Milton had written *Paradise Lost*, but in the seventeenth century. The only contemporary of Morris who thought of something similar was the French poet Hugo with *The Legend of the Centuries*.² But this legend, more than an epic poem, is a series of stories.

Morris did not believe a poet needed to invent new plots. He believed that the plots that dealt with the essential passions of mankind had already been found, and that each new poet could give them a particular inflection. Morris had heavily researched Old Norse literature, which he judged to be the flower of ancient Germanic culture, and there he found the story of Sigurd. He had translated the *Saga of the Volsung*, a prose work from the thirteenth century written in Iceland. There is an earlier version of the same story that achieved greater fame, which is the German *Song of the Nibelungs*, dating from the twelfth century—but that is, contrary to the chronology, a *later* version of the same story. The mythological and epic nature of the story is preserved in

the first. On the contrary, *Song of the Nibelungs*, written in Austria, went from epic to romantic, and the versification is Latinate, with rhymed stanzas. In England, it is unusual for the ancient Germanic subject matter to be lost and the Germanic verse forms to be preserved (although we have in the fourteenth century in English the alliterative poem by Langland).³ In Germany, the Germanic tradition has been preserved, but new verse forms from the south have been adopted, with a determined number of syllables, and rhyme, but no alliteration.

The story of Sigurd was known by all the Germanic peoples. It is alluded to in *Beowulf*, though the author of *Beowulf* preferred a different story for his eighth-century epic poem. Morris based his on the Norse, not the German, version. This is why his hero is named Sigurd and not Siegfried. The Norse names are kept, for the most part. It is true that Morris wrote in couplets, but his lines are not exempt from the frequent use of German alliteration. The poem, which is very long, is called *Sigurd the Volsung*. The central character is not the hero but rather Brynhild, though the story continues after her death.⁴ Morris uses the mythic elements that the German version ignores, so we have the god Odin at the beginning and at the end of the story. The story is long and complicated, and there are ancient and barbaric elements. For example, Sigurd kills a dragon who is guarding a treasure, then bathes in the hot blood of the dragon. This bath makes him invulnerable, except for one spot on his back where a leaf fell on him from a tree. And that is how Sigurd can die. This is reminiscent of Achilles' heel.

Sigurd is the bravest of men: king of Burgundy, and friend of Gunnar, king of the Low Countries. Gunnar has heard about a damsel, whose modern version we know as Sleeping Beauty. This damsel is under the spell of a magic sleep and surrounded by a wall of fire on a remote island in Iceland. She will give herself only to the man who can pass

through the wall of fire. Sigurd accompanies his friend Gunnar, and they come to the wall, and Gunnar does not dare penetrate it. So Sigurd, using magic, disguises himself as Gunnar. He is going to help his friend; he bandages his horse's eyes, and forces him to go through the wall of fire. He reaches the palace, and there is Brynhild, sleeping. He kisses her, wakes her up, and tells her that he is the hero destined to perform this feat. She falls in love with him and gives him her ring. He spends three nights with her, but not wanting to be disloyal to his friend, he places his sword between them. She asks why he is doing this, and he answers that if he didn't, they would both suffer misfortune. This episode of the sword placed between a man and a woman can be found in one of the stories of *A Thousand and One Nights*.

After spending three nights together, he bids her farewell. It is understood that he will come back to get her. He tells her his name is Gunnar, because he does not want to betray his friend. And she gives him her ring, and then she marries Gunnar, who takes her to his kingdom. Sigurd has used magic, and he forgets what has happened for a long time and marries Gunnar's sister, who is named Gudrun; but there is a rivalry between Brynhild and Gudrun. Then Gudrun learns the truth about the story: Brynhild tells her that her husband is the most noble king, for he passed through the wall of fire to win her, and she shows her the ring she gave to Sigurd. Brynhild then understands the deceit. At that moment, Brynhild realizes that she is not in love with Gunnar, that she is in love with the man who passed through the wall of fire, and that man is Sigurd. And she also knows that there is a spot on Sigurd's back where he is vulnerable, so she employs a third person to kill Sigurd. When she hears him shout as he is being killed, she laughs with a cruel laugh. Once Sigurd is dead, she understands that she has killed the man she loves, and she calls her husband and tells him to raise a high funeral pyre. Then she mortally wounds herself and asks to be laid next to Sigurd,

with the sword between them, like before. It is as if she wanted to return to the past.

She says that when Sigurd dies, his soul will rise to Odin's paradise. This paradise is lit by swords. She says that she will follow him to this paradise where "we will lie together and there will be no sword between us." The story continues, we see the death of Atli, and the poem concludes with Gudrun's revenge.⁵ Then the treasure of the Nibelungs is lost again, which is what provoked this whole tragic story.

It was somewhat ambitious to think about all this in the nineteenth century. Some contemporary critics say that *Sigurd* is one of the principle works of the nineteenth century. But the truth is that for some reason that we don't know, the epic poem in verse is, at times, quite distant from our literary demands. Morris's work garnered what the French call a *succès d'estime*. The defect Morris suffered from is slowness: the descriptions of battles, the death of the dragon, they are a bit languid. After the death of Brynhild, the poem falls off. With this, let us leave Morris's work.

We are now going to talk about Robert Louis Stevenson. He was born in Edinburgh in 1850 and died in 1894. His life was tragic, because he lived trying to escape from tuberculosis, which was an incurable illness. This took him from Edinburgh to London, from London to France, from France to the United States, and he died on an island in the Pacific. Stevenson carried out a vast literary labor. His works fill twelve or fourteen volumes. He wrote, among many other things, a famous book for children, *Treasure Island*.⁶ He also wrote fables, a detective novel, *The Wrecker*.⁷ People think of Stevenson as the author of *Treasure Island*, a work for children, and they hold him in less regard. They forget that he was an admirable poet, and that he is one of the masters of English prose.

Stevenson's parents and grandparents were lighthouse engineers, and we find among Stevenson's work a quite technical treatise on the construction of lighthouses.⁸ He

has a poem in which he seems to consider that his work as a writer—work that made the Stevenson family name famous—was in some way inferior to that work of his parents and grandparents. In that poem he speaks of “the towers and lamps we lit.”⁹ It’s a little like our own Lugones, when in that poem dedicated to his elders he says, “*Que nuestra tierra quiera salvarnos del olvido / por estos cuatro siglos que en ella hemos servido.*” [“That our land will save us from oblivion / for these four centuries we served her well.”] As if his elders, those of the War of Independence, were more important than he, Leopoldo Lugones.¹⁰

In his poem, Stevenson speaks of a “strenuous lineage that dusted from its hands the granite sand, and in its decline played with paper like a child.” That child is he, and that game with paper is his admirable literary work. Stevenson began by studying law, and then we know his life went through a dark period. In Edinburgh, Stevenson spent time with thieves and women of the night; when he says “women of the night” and “thieves,” we should imagine an essentially Puritan city. Edinburgh was, along with Geneva, one of the capitals of Calvinism in Europe. This environment was aware of its guilt, it was an environment of sinners, who acknowledged that they *were* sinners. And we can see this in the famous story *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, which we will come back to.¹¹

At first, Stevenson was interested in painting. He went to a doctor, who told him he had tuberculosis and should go south; he thought the south of France could be beneficial to his health. Stevenson wrote a short article about the south in which he tells about this. (The article is called “Ordered South.”)¹² Then Stevenson passes through London, which must have seemed to him like a fantastic city. And in London he wrote his *New Arabian Nights*.¹³ Later we will talk about one story in particular, “The Suicide Club.” As in *A Thousand and One Nights*, where we have a caliph named Harun the Orthodox, who wanders through the streets of Baghdad in

disguise, here in *The New Arabian Nights* by Stevenson, we have Prince Florizel of Bohemia, who wanders through the streets of London in disguise.¹⁴

Then Stevenson goes to France and dedicates himself to painting, through which he does not make his fortune; and he and his brother reach a hotel one winter night, I think in Switzerland, and inside is a group of gypsy women sitting around the fireplace.¹⁵ Stevenson did not want to be alone . . . there was also a young girl and an older woman—who later turned out to be the mother of the girl. And then Stevenson says to his brother, “You see that woman?” And his brother says, “The girl?” “No, no,” Stevenson says, “the older one, the one on the right. I am going to marry her.” His brother laughs, he thinks it is a joke. They enter the hotel. He makes friends with the woman, who is named Fanny Osbourne, and she tells him that she will stay there for only a few days, that she has to return to the United States, she has to return to San Francisco, California. Stevenson says nothing to her, but he has already made the decision to marry her. They don’t write to each other, but a year later Stevenson sets sail as an immigrant, arriving in the United States then crossing the vast continent; he works in one place as a miner. Then he arrives in San Francisco. There is the woman, she is a widow, and he proposes to her, and she accepts. In the meantime, Stevenson lives from his literary essays. These essays were written in an admirable prose, though they did not attract much public attention.

Then Stevenson returns to Scotland, and to entertain himself on the rainy days that are so frequent there, he draws a map on the ground with chalk. This map is in the shape of a triangle; there are hills, bays, gulfs. And his stepson, Lloyd Osbourne, with whom he will later co-author *The Wrecker*, asks him to tell him about Treasure Island.¹⁶ Each morning, he writes a chapter of *Treasure Island* and then reads it to his stepson. I think it has twenty-four

chapters, though I'm not certain.¹⁷ It is his most famous work, though not his best.

Stevenson also tries writing theater, but theater in the nineteenth century was an inferior genre. Writing for theater then was like writing for television now, or for the movies. He co-writes several plays with W. E. Henley, the editor of *The Observer*, and one is called *The Double Life*.¹⁸

Stevenson went to the city of San Francisco. He described it admirably. . . . Then, the doctors tell him that California will not cure him, that he needs to travel through the Pacific. Stevenson knew a lot about sailing, and he sails through the Pacific. Finally, he settles in a place called Vailima, and there he makes friends with the king of the island.¹⁹ And here something happens that is somewhat magical: a few years earlier, Stevenson had published *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and there was a priest, a French Jesuit, who had spent his life in the leper colony in that region, Father Damien. A Protestant minister with whom Stevenson dined one night revealed to him certain irregularities, we could call them, in the life of Father Damien, and for sectarian reasons, he attacked him. Stevenson wrote a letter in which he praised the work of Father Damien, and in it he says that it is the duty of all men to throw a cloak over his guilt, and that what the other had done, attacking his memory, was despicable. It is one of Stevenson's most eloquent passages.²⁰

Stevenson dies when the conflict between the Africans in the south and the English started, and Stevenson believed that the Dutch were in the right, that England's duty was to retreat. He published a letter in the *Times* saying just that, which made him very unpopular. But Stevenson did not care. Stevenson was not a religious man, but he had a strong sense of ethics. He believed, for example, that one of the duties of literature was to not publish anything that would depress its readers. This was a sacrifice on Stevenson's part, for Stevenson possessed a

great tragic strength. But he was most interested in the heroic. There is an article of Stevenson's titled "Pulvis et Umbra," in which he says that we do not know if God exists or not, but we do know that there is a single moral law in the universe.²¹ He begins by describing how extraordinary mankind is. "How strange," he says, "that the surface of the planet is inhabited by bipedal, ambulant beings, capable of reproducing themselves, and that these beings have a moral sense!" He believes that this moral law rules the entire universe. For example, he says, we know nothing about bees and ants, nevertheless, bees and ants form republics, and we can guess that for a bee and an ant, there are things that are forbidden, things they shouldn't do. And then he turns to man, and says, "Think about the life of a sailor"—that life Dr. Johnson said had the dignity of danger—"think about the difficulty of his life, think about how he lives exposed to storms, putting his life on the line. How he then spends a few days in port, getting drunk in the company of the lowest sort of women. Nevertheless, this sailor," he says, "is ready to risk his life for his companion." Then he adds that he does not believe in either punishment or reward. He believes that man dies with his body, that physical death is the death of the soul. And he anticipates the argument that says: From any lesson whatsoever nothing good can be expected. If we are hit on the head, we do not improve, and if we die there is no reason to believe that something rises from our decay. And Stevenson also believes this, and he says that in spite of all that, there is no man who does not know intimately when he has done a good deed and when he has done a bad one.

There's another essay by Stevenson, which I wish to speak of, about prose.²² Stevenson says that prose is a more complex art than poetry. The proof of this is the fact that prose comes after poetry. In poetry, each line, Stevenson says, creates an expectation and then satisfies it. For example, if we say, "*Oh, dulces prendas por mí mal*

halladas, / dulces y alegres cuando Dios quería, / conmigo estáis en la memoria mía, / y con ella en mi muerte conjuradas," the ear is already waiting for the *conjuradas* to rhyme with *halladas*.²³ But the task of a prose writer is much more difficult, says Stevenson, because his task consists of creating an expectation in each paragraph, while the paragraph has to be euphonic. Then, he must disappoint this expectation, but in a way that is also euphonic. Using this, Stevenson analyzes a passage from Macaulay to show that from the point of view of the prose, it is a weak passage, because there are sounds that are repeated too often. Then he analyzes a passage from Milton, in which he discovers a single error, but in everything else, in the use of vowels and consonants, it is admirable.

In the meantime, Stevenson continues to correspond with his friends in England, and as he is Scottish, he is full of nostalgia for Edinburgh. There is a poem to the cemetery in Edinburgh. From his exile in the Pacific, he sends all his writing to London. There, his books are published; they bring him great fame, and wealth. But he lives like an exile on his island, and the aborigines call him Tusitala, "the teller of tales," "the teller of stories." So Stevenson, surely, also learned the language of that country. There he lived with his stepson and his wife, and he received some visitors. One of the people who visited him was Kipling. Kipling said that he could pass an exam on Stevenson's work, that if someone mentioned a secondary character or an episode from his work, he would immediately recognize it.

Stevenson had strong Scottish features: he was tall, very thin, not very strong physically, but with a great spirit. Once he was in a café in Paris and he heard a Frenchman say that Englishmen were cowards. At that moment, Stevenson felt English—at that moment he believed that the Frenchman was talking about him. So he rose and slapped the Frenchman. And the Frenchman said, "Sir, you have slapped me." And Stevenson said, "So it seems." Stevenson was always a great friend of France. He wrote articles about

French poets, and admiring articles about Dumas's novels, about Verne, about Baudelaire.

The number of books about Stevenson is quite large. There is a book by Chesterton about Stevenson, published at the beginning of the century.²⁴ There is another book, one by Stephen Gwynn, an Irish man of letters, published in the collection *English Men of Letters*.²⁵

In the next class we will discuss a subject that was very dear to Stevenson: the subject of schizophrenia. We will look at this and at one of the stories of *New Arabian Nights*, and at a bit of Stevenson's poetry.

CLASS 25

THE WORKS OF ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON: *NEW ARABIAN NIGHTS*, "MARKHEIM," *THE STRANGE CASE OF DR. JEKYLL AND MR. HYDE*. JEKYLL AND HYDE IN THE MOVIES. *THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY*, BY OSCAR WILDE. "REQUIEM," BY STEVENSON.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 14, 1966

Today I am going to discuss the *New Arabian Nights*.¹ In English, people don't say *A Thousand and One Nights*, but rather *The Arabian Nights*. When a very young Stevenson arrived in London, it was undoubtedly a fantastic city to him. Stevenson conceived of the idea of writing a contemporary *Arabian Nights*, based, above all, on those tales that are about Harun al-Rashid, who wanders through the streets of Baghdad in disguise. He invented a prince, Florizel of Bohemia, and his aide-de-camp, Colonel Geraldine. He has them disguise themselves and wander around London. And he makes them have fantastic, though not magical, adventures (except in the sense of the atmosphere, which is magical).

Of all their adventures, I think the most memorable is "The Suicide Club." There, Stevenson imagines a character, a kind of cynic, who thinks he can take advantage of suicide to start a business. He is a man who knows that there are many people longing to take their own lives, but who do not dare do so. So he founds a club. In this club they play a weekly or biweekly—I don't remember which—game of cards. The prince joins this club out of a spirit of adventure,

and he has to swear not to reveal its secrets. Later he must take responsibility for carrying out justice because of a mistake his aide commits. There is one very impressive character. His name is Mr. Malthus, a paralytic. And this man has nothing left in life, but he has discovered that of all the sensations, of all the passions, the strongest is fear. And so he toys with fear. He tells the prince, who is a brave man, "You should envy me, sir, for I am a coward." He toys with fear by joining the Suicide Club.

All of this occurs in a neighborhood on the outskirts of London. The players drink champagne, laugh with false mirth; there is an atmosphere similar to that in some stories by Edgar Allan Poe, about whom Stevenson wrote. The game is played like this: there is a table covered in green cloth, the president of the club deals the cards, and it is said of him—as incredible as it seems—that he is not interested in suicide. The members of the club have to pay a fairly high fee. The president must fully trust them. Every care is taken to make sure no spies join. If the members have a fortune, they make the president of the club their heir, for he lives off this macabre industry. And then he deals out the cards. Each of the players, when he receives his card—the English deck consists of fifty-two cards—looks at it. In the pack there are just two black aces, and whoever receives one of the black aces is in charge of carrying out the sentence, he is the executioner, he has to kill the one who has received the other black ace. He has to kill him so that it seems like an accident. And in the first session the person who dies—or who is condemned to die—is Mr. Malthus. Mr. Malthus has been carried to the table. He is paralytic, he cannot move. But suddenly an almost inhuman sound is heard; the paralytic man stands up, then falls back into his chair. Then they adjourn. They will not see one another until the next meeting. The next day they read that Mr. Malthus, a gentleman held in high esteem by his family, has fallen from a pier in London. And then the adventure begins, which

ends with a duel in which Prince Florizel, who has sworn not to turn anyone in, kills the president of the club.

Then there is another adventure in “The Rajah’s Diamond,” which recounts all the crimes committed for the possession of a diamond. In the last chapter, the prince, who has the diamond, holds a conversation with a detective and asks if he is coming to arrest him. The detective says no, then the prince tells him the story. He tells it to him on a bank of the Thames. Then he says, “When I think of all the blood that has been spilled, all the crimes committed for that rock, I think we should condemn it to death.” Then he quickly pulls it out of his pocket and throws it into the Thames, and it is lost. The detective says, “I am ruined.” The prince answers, “Many men would envy your ruin.” Then the detective says, “I think it is my destiny to be bribed.” “I think so,” says the prince.

This book, the *New Arabian Nights*, is not only important for the delight it can bring us, but because when one reads it, one understands that somehow Chesterton’s entire novelistic oeuvre has come out of it. There we have the seeds of *The Man Who Was Thursday*.² All of Chesterton’s novels, even if they are more clever than Stevenson’s, have the same atmosphere as Stevenson’s stories. Then Stevenson does other things. By the time he writes his detective novel, *The Wrecker*, there is a totally different atmosphere. Everything takes place first in California, then in the South Seas. Moreover, Stevenson believed that the defect of the genre of detective novels was that no matter how clever, there was something mechanical about them—an absence of life. So, Stevenson says that in his detective novels he makes his characters more realistic than the plot, which is the opposite of what is usually the case in a detective novel.

Let us now take a look at a subject that always preoccupied Stevenson. There is a very commonly used psychological word, the word “schizophrenia,” which is the idea of a split personality. That word had not been coined at

the time, I believe. Now it is used very commonly. Stevenson was very preoccupied with this subject. In the first place, because he was very interested in ethics, and also because in his house was a chest of drawers made by a cabinetmaker in Edinburgh, a respectable and respected craftsman, but at night, on some nights, he would leave his house and become a robber. That subject of a split personality interested Stevenson, and with Henley he wrote a play called *The Double Life*.³

But Stevenson felt he was not finished with the subject. So he wrote the story "Markheim," the story of a man who becomes a thief, then a murderer.⁴ On Christmas Eve, he enters a pawnshop. Stevenson introduces the pawnbroker as a very disagreeable person, who does not trust Markheim because he suspects that the jewels he wants to sell him were stolen. Night arrives. The pawnbroker says that he has to close early and that Markheim will have to pay him for his time. Markheim tells him that he has not come to sell, he has come to buy something, something that is buried deep in the shop. The other thinks this odd and makes a joke: since Markheim tells him that everything he sells has been inherited from an uncle of his, the pawnbroker says to him, "I assume your uncle has left you money, now you want to spend it." Markheim accepts the joke, and when they go to the back of the shop, he stabs the pawnbroker and kills him. When Markheim goes from being a thief to a murderer, the world changes for him. He thinks, for example, that natural laws may have been suspended, for he has infringed upon a moral law by committing the crime. And then, in a curious invention of Stevenson's, the shop is filled with mirrors and watches. And these watches seem to be running some kind of race; they become a symbol of time passing. Markheim takes the pawnbroker's keys. He knows the safe is on an upper floor, but he must hurry because the servant will come. At the same time, he sees his own image multiplied and moving in the mirrors. And that image he

sees becomes an image of the entire city. Because from the moment he has killed the pawnbroker, he assumes the whole city is pursuing him or will pursue him.

He climbs up to the back room, pursued by the ticking of the clocks and the changing images in the mirrors. He hears steps. He thinks those steps could be those of the housekeeper coming back after seeing her dead master, and that she will turn him in. But the person climbing the stairs is not a woman, and Markheim has the impression he knows the person. He does know him, because it is he himself; hence we are faced with the ancient theme of the double. In Scottish superstition, the double is called "fetch," which means to look for. So when somebody sees his double it is because he is seeing himself.

This character enters and starts up a conversation with Markheim; he sits down and tells him that he will not denounce him, that a year ago he would have thought it a lie to be called a thief, and that now, he is not only a thief but a murderer. This would have seemed unbelievable just a few months before. But now that he has killed a person, why would he have a problem killing another? "The housekeeper is going to come," he tells him, "the housekeeper is a weak woman. Another stab and you can leave, because I'm not going to turn you in." That "other I" is supernatural, and signifies the evil side of Markheim. Markheim argues with him. He tells him, "It is true I am a thief, it is true I am a murderer, those are my acts, but is a man his acts? Might there not be something in me that does not fit the rigid and senseless definitions of 'thief' and 'murderer'? Can I not repent? Am I not already repentant about what I have done?" The other tells him that "these philosophical considerations are all fine and good, but consider that the housekeeper is about to come, that if she finds you here she will turn you in. Your duty right now is to save yourself."

The dialogue is long and deals with ethical problems. Markheim tells him that he has killed, but that does not mean that he is a murderer. And then the character who has,

until that moment, been a dark figure, turns into a radiant character. He is no longer an evil angel but a good one. Then the double disappears, and the housekeeper approaches. Markheim is there with the knife in his hand, and he tells her to go get the police because he has just killed her master. And this is how Markheim saves himself. This story makes a deep impression when you read it because it is written with a deliberate slow pace and deliberate delicacy. The protagonist, as you can see, is in an extreme situation: they are coming, they will discover him, they will arrest him, they will possibly hang him. But the discussion he has with that other, who is he himself, is one of delicate, honest casuistry.

The story was praised, but Stevenson thought he still had not finished with the subject of schizophrenia. Stevenson, many years later, was sleeping beside his wife and started shouting. She woke him up, and he was feverish—he had coughed up blood that day. He told her, “What a pity you woke me up because I was dreaming a beautiful nightmare!” What he was dreaming—here we can think about Caedmon and the angel, about Coleridge—what he had dreamed was that scene in which Dr. Jekyll drinks the potion and turns into Hyde, who represents evil. The scene of the doctor drinking something he has concocted and then turning into the opposite is what Stevenson’s dream gave him, and then he had to invent all the rest.

Today, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* has a disadvantage, and that is that the story is so well known that almost all of us know it before we read it. On the other hand, when Stevenson published *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, in the year 1880—that is, long before *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, which was inspired by Stevenson’s novel—when Stevenson published his book, he published it as if it were a detective novel: only at the end do we learn that these two people are two facets of the same character.⁵ Stevenson proceeds with great skill. Already in the title there is a suggested duality: two characters are introduced. But these two characters never appear at the same time—Hyde is the

projection of Jekyll's evil—the author does everything possible to prevent us from thinking they are the same person. He starts by making a distinction between their ages. Hyde, the evil one, is younger than Jekyll. One is dark, the other is not: he is blond and tall. Hyde is not deformed. If you looked at his face you could see no deformity, because he was pure evil.

Many films have been based on this plot. But all those who have made films based on this story made a mistake; they used the same actor to play Jekyll and Hyde. Moreover, in the film, we see the story from the inside. We see the doctor—the doctor who has the idea of a potion that can separate evil from good in a man. Then we watch the transformation. So it is all reduced to something quite secondary. On the other hand, I think a film should be made with two actors. Then we would have the surprise that these two actors—already known by the viewer—are in the end the same person. They would have to change the names of Jekyll and Hyde, because they are too well known; they would have to be given different names. In all the film versions, Dr. Jekyll is shown as a severe, Puritan man with unassailable habits, and Hyde as a drunk, a rake. For Stevenson, evil did not essentially consist of sexual licentiousness or alcoholism. For him, evil was, above all, gratuitous cruelty. There is a scene at the beginning of the novel in which a character is standing at a high window and looking out at the labyrinth of mankind, and he sees a little girl coming along one street and a man along another. They are both walking toward the same corner. When they meet at the corner, the man deliberately tramples on the girl. This was evil for Stevenson—cruelty. Then we see that man enter Dr. Jekyll's laboratory, then bribe his pursuers with a check. We might think that Hyde is the son of Jekyll, or that he knows some terrible secret in Jekyll's life. And only in the last chapter do we find out that he is the same man, when we read Dr. Jekyll's confessions.

It has been said that the idea that one man is two is a cliché. But as Chesterton has pointed out, Stevenson's idea is the opposite, it is the idea that a man is not two, but that if a man commits a sin, that sin stains him. So at the beginning, Dr. Jekyll drinks the potion—if he had been more good than evil, it would have converted him into an angel—and he is changed into a being who is pure evil—cruel, and merciless—a man who has no conscience or scruples. He gives himself over to the pleasure of being purely evil, of not being two persons, as all of us are. At first, it is enough for him to drink the potion, but then there is a morning when he wakes up and feels smaller. Then he looks at his hand and that hand is the hairy hand of Hyde. Then he drinks the potion, and again turns into a respectable man. Some time passes. He is sitting in Hyde Park. Suddenly he feels that his clothes are too big, and he has changed into the other. Then, when there is an ingredient for the potion that he cannot find, it is the same as the trap the devil sets. Finally, one of the characters kills himself and with him, the other also dies.

This was imitated by Oscar Wilde in the last chapter of *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*. You will remember that Dorian Gray is a man who does not age, a man devoted to vice, who watches his portrait age. In the last chapter, Dorian, who is young, who looks pure, sees his own image in the portrait, his reflection. Then he destroys this portrait and he dies. When they find him, they find that the portrait is as the painter had painted it, and he is an old, corrupt, monstrous man, identifiable only from his clothes and rings.

I recommend you read Stevenson's book, *The Ebb-Tide*; it was very well translated into Spanish by Ricardo Baeza.⁶ There is another book, unfinished, written in Scottish, that is very difficult to read.⁷

But speaking about Stevenson, I have forgotten something very important, which is Stevenson's poetry. There are many nostalgic poems, and there is a short poem called "Requiem." This poem, if translated literally, would

not be very impressive. The sense of the poem is more in its intonation. The literal meaning is not very impressive, as is the case with all good poems.

It reads like this:

Under the wide and starry sky,
Dig the grave and let me lie.
Glad did I live and gladly die,
And I laid me down with a will.

This be the verse you grave for me;
Here he lies where he longed to be;
Home is the sailor, home from sea,
And the hunter home from the hill.

Bajo el vasto y estrellado cielo,
Cavad la tumba y dejadme yacer ahí.
Viví con alegría y muero con alegría,
Y me he acostado a descansar con ganas.

Sea éste el verso que ustedes graben para mí:
Aquí yace donde quería yacer;
Ha vuelto el marinero, ha vuelto del mar,
Y el cazador ha vuelto de la colina.

In English the lines vibrate like a sword, the sharp sounds predominate from the very first line, with the triple alliteration at the end of the last line. It is not written in the Scottish dialect, but one can hear the Scottish music. Then there are, in Stevenson's work, love poems, poems dedicated to his wife. There is one in which he compares God to a craftsman and says that He has made her to suit him like a sword. Then, he has poems about friendship, poems about landscapes, poems in which he describes the Pacific Ocean, and others in which he describes Edinburgh. Those poems are more pathetic because he writes about

Edinburgh, about Scotland and its Highlands, knowing that he will never return there, that he is condemned to die in the Pacific.

EPILOGUE 1

I believe that the phrase “obligatory reading” is a contradiction in terms; reading should not be obligatory. Should we ever speak of “obligatory pleasure”? What for? Pleasure is not obligatory, pleasure is something we seek. Obligatory happiness! We seek happiness as well. For twenty years, I have been a professor of English Literature in the School of Philosophy and Letters at the University of Buenos Aires, and I have always advised my students: If a book bores you, leave it; don’t read it because it is famous, don’t read it because it is modern, don’t read a book because it is old. If a book is tedious to you, leave it, even if that book is *Paradise Lost*—which is not tedious to me—or *Don Quixote*—which also is not tedious to me. But if a book is tedious to you, don’t read it; that book was not written for you. Reading should be a form of happiness, so I would advise all possible readers of my last will and testament—which I do not plan to write—I would advise them to read a lot, and not to get intimidated by writers’ reputations, to continue to look for personal happiness, personal enjoyment. It is the only way to read.

—JORGE LUIS BORGES

AFTERWORD

“I love teaching, especially because when I am teaching, I am learning,” Jorge Luis Borges said in many interviews.¹ A little earlier he had referred to teaching as “one of the few delights left to me.” And there is no doubt about the double pleasure it gave Borges to be in front of a class.

Such pleasure can be felt in this book, which brings together a complete course given by the writer in the Department of Philosophy and Letters of the University of Buenos Aires in 1966. At that time, Borges had already been teaching for several years at this institution. He had been hired as a professor of English and North American Literature in 1956, chosen over another applicant in spite of never having received a university degree.² On several occasions, Borges expressed—in that tone of his infused with his sense of humor and full confidence in his own ability—his surprise at this appointment.

In his *Autobiografía*, after mentioning his appointment as the director of the National Library in 1955 Borges explains: “The following year I received a new satisfaction, by being named professor of English and North American literature at the University of Buenos Aires. Other candidates had sent detailed accounts of their translations, articles, conferences, and other accomplishments. I limited myself to the following declaration: ‘Without realizing it, I have been preparing for this position my entire life.’ That simple statement had the desired effect. They hired me, and I spent twelve happy years at the university.”³

The course published in this book presents us with a Borges who had already spent ten years dedicated to

teaching, not only his university classes but also various courses he gave in institutions such as the Argentine Association of English Culture. It also shows us a different facet of Borges than does a literary text or an interview, or even a lecture. The classes differ from a lecture in one essential way: here, the writer—so given to telling anecdotes and changing the subject—was obliged to restrict himself to the announced program. He could not, as he frequently did under other circumstances, after half an hour, ask jokingly, “What was the title of this lecture?” We can see how he managed to give his classes unity and coherence while still indulging in considerable digressions.

Borges himself was conscious of this difference. “I preferred classes to lectures. When I give a lecture, if I talk about Spinoza or Berkeley, the listener is more interested in my presence than in the content. For example, my way of talking, my gestures, the color of my tie, or my haircut. In classes at the university, which have continuity, the only students who come are those interested in the content of the class. Hence, one can carry on a full dialogue. I cannot see, but I can feel the atmosphere around me. For example, if they are listening attentively or are distracted.”⁴

One important point of these classes is the position Borges gave to literature. “I judge literature hedonistically,” he said in another interview. “That is, I judge literature according to the pleasure or the feeling it gives me. I have been a professor of literature for many years, and I am not unaware of the fact that the pleasure literature gives is one thing, another is the historic study of that literature.”⁵ Such an approach is clear from the very first class, in which Borges explains that he will discuss history only when the study of the literary works requires it.

In the same way, Borges places authors above literary movements, which he defines at the beginning of the class about Dickens as a “convenience” of historians. Though he does not forget the structural characteristics of the texts

being studied, Borges focuses mostly on the plot and the individuality of the authors. The course includes texts that the writer loves, and he shows this constantly through his fascination with telling the stories and the biographies. What Borges tries to do as a professor, more than prepare his students for exams, is excite them and entice them to read the works, to discover the writers. Throughout the entire course there is hardly a mention of the exams, and his comment at the end of the second class about Browning is very moving when he says:

I feel some kind of remorse. I think I have been unfair to Browning. But with Browning something happens that happens with all poets, that we must question them directly. I think, in any case, that I have done enough to interest you in Browning's work.

More than once that enthusiasm slightly diverts Borges from his path, and in the second class on Samuel Johnson, after narrating the legend of the Buddha, he says he is sorry: "You will forgive me this digression, but the story is beautiful."

More proof that the books and authors studied here are among Borges's favorites is that throughout his life he made certain to write prefaces to editions of many of them, and he included many of them in his collection, *Biblioteca personal*, from Hispamérica. (This was his last selection of other writers' texts before he died.) This predilection is even more obvious in his choice of poems. Borges does not always analyze the author's most famous works; instead he deals with the works that made the greatest impression on him, the ones he discusses throughout his entire literary oeuvre.

Borges's passion for stories and his admiration for the authors do not stand in the way of him formulating critical judgments with implacable frequency. By exposing the failures of the works and the mistakes of the authors, Borges is not seeking to insult them but rather to perhaps remove

any sacred halo they have and bring them closer to the students. By pointing out their failures, he also emphasizes their virtues. In this way, he dares assert on more than one occasion that the fable of *Beowulf* is “poorly imagined,” and he describes Samuel Johnson in this way: “Johnson was a wreck, physically, even though he was very strong. He was heavy and ugly. He had nervous tics.” This only paves the way for captivating the students’ interest. Right on its heels comes the conclusion that “he had one of the most sensible intellects of his era; he had a truly brilliant intellect.”

When faced with literary criticism that questions the role of the author, Borges emphasizes the human and individual characteristics of the work. Yet he does not establish a relationship of necessity between the life of the author and the author’s texts. He is simply fascinated—and fascinates the students—by narrating the lives of the artists; he buries himself in the poems, the narratives, with a contemporary critical gaze, in which irony and humor are always present.

In his effort to bring the texts down to earth, Borges makes surprising comparisons that frame each work and make its value clear. Hence, when he explores the theme of boasting and courage in *Beowulf*, he compares its characters with those of the *compadritos porteños*, or riverside roughnecks, of the last century, and recites not one, but three groups of couplets that must have sounded quite strange in a class about Anglo-Saxon literature of the eighth century. The writer, moreover, pauses at exciting details that would have been expendable in the curriculum, such as the different concepts of color in Anglo-Saxon, Greek, and Celtic poetry, or the battle of Brunanburh compared to that of the Argentine battle of Junín.

In his analysis of Saxon texts, Borges devotes himself almost entirely to narrating, forgetting his role as professor and approaching quite closely that of the ancient storyteller. He tells stories told by other men who came long before him, and he does so with absolute fascination, as if each time the

story was repeated, he was discovering it for the first time. In keeping with this fascination, his comments are almost always about questions of metaphysics. Borges is constantly asking himself what was going on in the minds of the ancient Anglo-Saxon poets when they wrote these texts, suspecting that he will never find the answers.

One typical characteristic of a storyteller is anticipating things that will be told later, with the goal of keeping the listener in suspense. He does this by constantly declaring that he will tell later, or in the next class, something “strange” or “curious” or “interesting.”

Within the framework of the classes, Borges’s erudition is always apparent. This erudition, however, never limits his communication with his students. Borges doesn’t quote in order to show off his knowledge, but only when it seems appropriate to the subject at hand. What matters to him more than the precise facts are the ideas. In spite of this, and in spite of excusing himself for his bad memory for dates, it is surprising the number of dates he does remember, and with what incredible precision. *We* must remember that at the time he gave these classes—and since 1955—Borges was almost completely blind, and certainly unable to read. His quoting of texts, therefore, and his recitation of poetry, depended on his memory, and are testimony to the vast extent of his readings.

Through this course wander Leibniz, Dante, Lugones, Virgil, Cervantes, and certainly the indispensable Chesterton, who seems to have written about almost everything. There also appear some of Borges’s favorite excerpts, like Coleridge’s famous dream, which he included in so many books and lectures. But we also have here a broader and deeper analysis of certain works than appears in any of his other works: particularly in his class about Dickens, an author whom he didn’t discuss in detail in any of his writings, or in his readings of the Anglo-Saxon texts—his last passion—to which he devotes the first seven classes,

where he didn't have the limitations of space that he had in his other histories of literature.

As for the textual accuracy of the quotes and narrations, it is interesting to point to what Borges himself says toward the end of his second class on Browning. Remembering the volume that Chesterton dedicates to the life and work of that poet, Borges comments that Chesterton knew Browning's poetry so well that he did not consult a single book when he was composing his study, fully trusting his memory. Apparently, these quotes were often incorrect, and were subsequently corrected by the editor. Borges laments the loss of those possibly ingenious changes that Chesterton made to Browning's work, and that it would have been fascinating to compare them to the originals. In the case of these classes, and respecting his position, Borges's narratives have been left intact, retaining the changes imposed by his own memory.

By the same token, the endnotes attempt to complete information Borges assumed his students understood; they are there to help facilitate the reading. Even without any changes or additions, though, the classes are clear, imaginative, and enthralling.

Finally, as we read these classes we can imagine a blind Professor Borges, sitting before his students, reciting in that very personal tone of voice verses of unknown Saxon poetry in their original language and participating in polemics about famous romantic poets with whom he is, perhaps today, discussing these same issues.

—MARTÍN ARIAS

BORGES IN CLASS

. . . He ðe us ðas beagas geaf . . .
Beowulf: 2635

Editing this book was like running after a Borges who was constantly getting lost among the books in a library or—to use a metaphor dear to our writer—disappearing around corner after corner of a vast labyrinth. As soon as we found a date or a biography we were looking for, Borges would race ahead and vanish behind an unknown personage or an obscure Oriental legend. When, after looking long and hard, we found him again, he would toss us an anecdote without a date, a quote from an author, and again we would watch him disappear, escaping through the crack of a door left ajar or between rows of shelves and racks. In order to recover his words, we followed him through the pages of innumerable encyclopedias and rooms of the National Library in Buenos Aires; we searched for him in the pages of the books he wrote and in dozens of lectures and interviews he gave; we found him in his nostalgia for Latin, in the Norse sagas, and in the memories of his colleagues and friends. By the time we finally completed our task, we had traversed more than two thousand years of history, the seven seas, and the five continents. But Borges kept fleeing from us, calm and smiling. Running from ancient India to medieval Europe hadn't tired him out. Traveling from Caedmon to Coleridge was, for him, an everyday affair.

Two joys have been ours since completing this labor. The first is that we managed to open a door onto space and time, allowing others to peek into the classroom of the University of Buenos Aires on Calle Independencia. The

second is that we were able to enjoy these classes with the same intensity as did those students who attended them more than thirty years before. Researching and revising every nook and cranny of the text caused us to unintentionally memorize every poem and every sentence, to associate each and every statement with his stories and poems, to formulate (and then often reject) innumerable hypotheses about every comma, every period, and every line.

Borges once wrote, "That someone will repeat a cadence of Dunbar or Frost or of that man who in the middle of the night saw a tree that bleeds, the Cross, and think that they heard it for the first time from my lips. Nothing else matters to me."¹

Upon finishing this book, readers will find that they remember with delight lines of Wordsworth and Coleridge, that William Morris's music has bewitched them, that characters as remote as Hugh O'Neill or Harald Hardrada have become familiar, that thanks to this most universal of Argentines, their ears echo with the crashing of weapons of the battle of Brunanburh and the Anglo-Saxon verses from "The Dream of the Rood." Borges would surely smile, satisfied.

In the twenty-five classes that make up this course, Borges takes us on a veritable journey through English literature, always remaining close to his own readings and the works themselves. This journey begins in the mists of time with the arrival in England of the Angles, Jutes, and Saxons; continues on to the works of Samuel Johnson; lingers on Macpherson, the romantic poets, and the Victorian era; offers a panorama of the life and works of the pre-Raphaelites; and ends at the nineteenth century, in Samoa, with one of the writers Borges held most dear, Robert Louis Stevenson.

"I have taught exactly forty terms of English Literature at the university, but more than that I have tried to convey my love for this literature," Borges once said. "I have

preferred to teach my students, not English literature—which I know nothing about—but my love for certain authors, or, even better, certain pages, or even better than that, certain lines. And this is enough, I think. One falls in love with a line, then with a page, then with an author. Well, why not? It is a beautiful process. I have tried to lead my students toward it.”²

From the very first class it is clear that this will be a very idiosyncratic journey, guided by the professor’s personal preferences. The thread that unites these lectures is outright literary enjoyment, the affection with which Borges treats each of these works, and his clear intention to share his enthusiasm for every author and period studied.

Among these preferences, there is one that occupies a prominent place and to which the professor dedicates nothing less than seven classes, more than a quarter of the syllabus: the language and literature of Anglo-Saxon England. The extent of this emphasis and focus, highly infrequent for any course on English literature, is even odder considering that the course was taught in a Spanish-speaking country. Borges dedicates one class to kennings, two to the study of *Beowulf*, and another few to the Anglo-Saxon bestiary, the war poems of Maldon and Brunanburh, the “Dream of the Rood,” and “The Grave.” One inevitably wonders why this emphasis on the language and literature of early medieval England. What did Borges see in this literature? What did the study of Old English represent to him? The answers to these questions weave in and out of fiction and reality, Borges’s personal history, and his philosophical and literary worldview. In order to arrive at those answers, we should begin by briefly analyzing the history of the English language, traditionally divided into three stages:

Old English or Anglo-Saxon: fifth century to ca. 1066

Middle English: ca. 1066–1500

Modern English: 1500 to the present

The earliest form, Old English, retained many of the archaic characteristics of Common Germanic. Its considerably complex grammar featured three genders (masculine nouns such as *se eorl*, "the man" or *se hring*, "the ring"; neuters such as *þæt hus*, "the house," or *þæt boc* "the book"; and feminines such as *seo sunne*, "the sun," or *seo guð* "the battle"); three numbers in the pronouns (singular first person *ic*, first person plural "we," first personal double *wit*, "we two"); an elaborate system of verb conjugations; and numerous declensional paradigms, with five cases of inflection for articles, nouns, and adjectives. The vocabulary was, at first, almost wholly Germanic, just barely influenced by a handful of Latin and a smattering of Celtic loanwords. Old English is thus mostly incomprehensible to speakers of Modern English, who must study it as if it were a foreign language. Herewith an example, from the entry for the year 793 from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*:

Her wæron reðe forebecna cumene ofer Norðhymbra land, and þæt folc earmlic bregdon, þæt wæron ormete ligræscas, and fyrenne dracan wæron gesewene on þam lifte fleogende. Þam tacnum sona fyligde mycel hunger, and litel æfter þam, þæs ilcan geares on vi Idus Ianuarii, earmlice hepenra manna hergung adilegode Godes cyrican in Lindisfarnæe þurh hreaflic ond mansliht.

That Old English was the remote ancestor of the English language, so beloved of our writer, is sufficient explanation to justify his interest in studying it: the compositions Professor Borges analyzes in his lectures are among the first writings in a language we could call English.³ But the Anglo-Saxon tongue has two features that Borges found irresistibly attractive. In the first place, Old English held, for him, a personal significance: it was none

other than the language spoken by his remote paternal ancestors, the side of the family from which he had inherited his literary vocation and his vast erudition. His British grandmother, Frances Haslam, was born in Staffordshire. "It may be no more than a romantic superstition of mine," Borges wrote in his *Autobiografía*, "but the fact that the Haslams lived in Northumbria and Mercia—or, as they are today called, Northumberland and the Midlands—links me with a Saxon and perhaps a Danish past."

In his lecture "Blindness," in *Seven Nights*, Borges states: "I was a professor of English Literature at our university. What could I do to teach this almost infinite literature, this literature that exceeds the length of the life of a man or even a generation? . . . Some students came to see me after they had taken and passed their exam. . . . I told these young women (there were nine or ten of them): 'I have an idea, now that you have passed and I have fulfilled my duty as your professor. Wouldn't it be interesting if we took up the study of a language and a literature that we barely know?' They asked me what that language and that literature would be. 'Well, naturally, the English language and English literature. We will begin to study it, now that we have been freed from the frivolity of exams; we will start studying it from the very beginning.'"

Secondly, Borges finds in the scenes of this poetry, the authentic "epic flavor" that so moved him. More than once Borges expresses this delight by comparing the pen to the sword, the sentimental to the heroic, his role as a poet to the courage shown by his own ancestors in combat. In this sense, Old English battle poems represented for Borges the final merging and closure of what he called "the intimate discord of his two lineages": the literary legacy he received from the English side of his family, on the one hand, and the martial mandate to die courageously in battle that he had inherited from his maternal Argentine forebears.

In addition, there is the unexpected nature of the discovery. In his *Autobiografía*, Borges asserts: "I had always

thought of English literature as the richest in the world; the discovery now of a secret chamber at the very threshold of that literature came to me as an additional gift. Personally, I knew that the adventure would be an endless one, that I could go on studying Old English for the rest of my days. The pleasure of study, not the vanity of mastery, has been my chief aim, and I have not been disappointed in the last twelve years.” Borges had spent twelve years studying Old English by the time he wrote these words, but he actually persisted in this endeavor for several decades, well into his final years. Old English would accompany Borges to the end of his days, and beyond. In 1978, at age seventy-eight, Borges produced a volume of texts translated directly from Old English into Spanish, in collaboration with María Kodama. He entitled it *Breve antología anglosajona*, *A Brief Anglo-Saxon Anthology*. In its preface, he further extends and elaborates on the idea of stumbling upon a hidden hoard:

“About two hundred years ago it was discovered that [English literature] contained a kind of secret chamber, akin to the subterranean gold guarded by the serpent of myth. That ancient gold was the poetry of the Anglo-Saxons.”⁴

What Borges found in this chamber was something at once strange and remote, precious and captivating, a treasure that, when dug up and restored, had the power to transport him back to the heroic and adventurous era of his own military ancestors.

To this primordial and epic appeal we must add an aesthetic factor, the sheer pleasure that the writer found in the sounds of this language. When he began to study it, Borges felt as if Old English words resounded with a strange beauty:

“The verses in a foreign language have a certain prestige they do not have in one’s own language, because one can hear them, because one can see each of the words.”⁵

Borges would never forget this initial enchantment. Every time he referred to Old English, he would allude again to this world of auditory experience:

“ . . . for the Anglo-Saxon language—Old English—was by its very harshness destined for epic poetry, in other words, to celebrate courage and loyalty. That is why . . . what these poets do best is describe battles. As if we can hear the sound of swords clashing, the blow of spears against shields, the tumult and shouts of the battlefield.”

From such statements, it seems that our professor would have thoroughly loved to be there in the middle of the brawl, hearing and witnessing the clash of the warglaives, the rush of the javelins, the crashing of charges and the smashing of medieval armies. But the evocative power that these Anglo-Saxon verses have for Borges does not end there. These auditory images are complemented by visual ones. Each time the frugality of the original Anglo-Saxon sources leaves a detail or an image without description, Borges embellishes the verses with scenes from his own imagination. We find this example in his narration of the “Battle of Maldon.” The original poem tells us how Byrhtnoth, the Anglo-Saxon earl, rallied his troops before the encounter:

*Het þa hyssa hwæne hors forlætan,
feor afysan, and forð gangan,*

[He then ordered each warrior / to let go of his horse,
to send it afar / and to march on.]

Borges’s translation, however, offers a number of subtle variations:

“He ordered his men to break ranks, to get off their horses, to whip them back to the *querencia*, and to march on . . .”

The mere presence of the word *querencia* in the above text points to the simmering of a strange and potent brew. *Querencia* is a typical *gaucho* word used in the Argentine field and pampas; it literally means “attachment, fondness, longing,” but its actual, metaphorical meaning refers to a horse’s perceived home or base. When left alone and without guidance, a horse will follow its longing or attachment, that is, he will head *home*. But neither the whipping of horses nor the goal of sending them back home appear at all in the original. The Maldon poet just states that the horses were sent off. That Borges would enrich this scene with such elements, and then weave into it the very concept of *querencia*, a rather folkloric word reminiscent of traditional Argentine rural life, is indeed an amazing act of literary fusion; but this is a habit that this most universal of writers would often indulge, both throughout this course and in many of his fictions. These lively South American additions may have little to do with medieval England, but they undoubtedly help bring the battle of Maldon and its protagonists from the tenth century into our era, and closer to his students’ cultural frame of reference.

Continuing to study this poem, Borges re-creates the landscape and the initial scene of the battle:

“Then the earl tells them to form a line. Far off, they will see the tall boats of the Vikings, those boats with the dragon on the prow and the striped sails, and the Norwegian Vikings, who have already landed.”

Once again, Borges’s description is a free version, enriched by his own imagination. The earl’s orders that the professor cites can be found in the verses of “Maldon,” but

neither the tall ships nor the striped sails nor the arrival of the Vikings appear in the poem, whose opening lines were lost. Borges, however, needs to imagine the setting in detail for the action to begin to take place, and he tells us of the Saxons “watching the Vikings descend from their boats.” He immediately adds: “We can imagine the Vikings with their helmets adorned with horns, imagine all these people arriving.”

Borges doesn't just want his students to approach the poem as a philological specimen; his goal is to transport them to the actual scene of the battle. Borges's depictions are indeed extremely vivid and often resemble actual movies.⁶ He, in fact, associates the poem's imagery with cinematography on more than one occasion. Further into his class on “Maldon,” he states:

“Then there appears in the scene—because this poem is very beautiful—a young man . . . And this young man . . . has a falcon on his fist; that is, he is devoted to what is called falconry . . . And something happens, something that is realistic and has symbolic value, something a movie director would use now. The young man realizes that the situation is serious, so he lets his beloved falcon . . . fly off into the forest, and he joins the battle.”

This most peculiar professor then uses the same cinematic procedure to describe the battle of Stamford Bridge:

“The Saxon army advanced with thirty or forty men on horseback. We can imagine them covered in armor, and the horses also might have had armor. If you have seen [the film] *Alexander Nevsky*, it might help you imagine this scene.”

These movie-like descriptions immerse us in the tension of the verses. In his role as professor, Borges not only describes and analyzes but also infuses these epic words with life, meaning, and movement, as a film director would do.

It is this same sensibility that leads Borges to weave history and legend, myth and reality into his classes. Without the restrictions imposed on him by a lecture or a set number of pages in a publication, Borges exhibits here his habit of mixing facts with literary fiction, blurring the line between these two realms that in the Borgesian universe often split apart only to fuse together later on.

Thus, in his description of the Battle of Hastings, Borges adds a poetic episode from Heine or legendary details taken from the *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, by William de Malmesbury; in his explanation of the Viking expeditions, he throws in quotes from *Chronicles of the Kings of Norway*, knowing full well that this work weaves historical fact with legendary or fictitious material. Needless to say, this is never the result of carelessness but is fully in keeping with the writer's worldview.⁷ Borges—for whom history sometimes represented yet another branch of fantastic literature—was less worried about the reality of historical facts than the literary pleasure or emotion evoked by every scene and story. In keeping with this, after explaining the context that led up to the battle of Stamford Bridge, our professor laments:

“So, we have King Harold and his brother, Earl Toste or Tostig, depending on the text. Now, the earl believed that he had a right to part of the kingdom, that the king should divide England between them. King Harold did not agree, so Tostig left England and allied himself with the king of Norway, who was named Harald Hardrada, Harald the Resolute, the Hard . . . Pity he has almost the same name as Harold, but history cannot be changed.”

Borges would like to go as far as change the names of the protagonists in order to improve the literary quality of this episode!

In conclusion: It doesn't matter if in reality there was a Viking who sacked a city, believing it was Rome; it doesn't matter if King Olaf Haraldsson really possessed extraordinary agility; it doesn't matter if the minstrel Taillefer really entered into the Battle of Hastings doing acrobatics with his sword. Beyond their veracity, these scenes have value because of how they contribute to the creation of an atmosphere.

Given over to the literary enjoyment produced by these words, exalting in the bravery and the iron syllables of the language, Borges plays in these classes with etymologies, weaving into his analysis Anglo-Saxon words and verses; he recites them, explains and analyzes them, and attempts—above all—to awaken in his students the same pleasure that he derives from this language and this literature.

In other words, Borges feels that his vocation is to share this ancient gold. In the last lines of the famous epic, the Geats claim that Beowulf was the mildest of kings, kind to his kin and eager for praise. We know that Borges was at once mild and gentle; we know for a fact that he had no interest in fame. We can be certain that he would have been delighted, however, to receive the royal title of which this course makes him a worthy recipient: *beahgifa*, “giver of rings,” “distributor of treasures,” “sharer of wealth,” the expression the Anglo-Saxons used to extoll the generosity of monarchs when they passed out gold to their men.

—MARTÍN HADIS

ENDNOTES

CLASS 1

1. Borges is referring here to the first edition of *Literaturas germánicas medievales* [*Medieval Germanic Literature*] (Buenos Aires: Falbo Librero Editor, 1965). Co-authored with María Esther Vázquez, it is a revised version of a book titled *Antiguas literaturas germánicas* [*Ancient Germanic Literature*], originally co-authored with Delia Ingenieros and published in the Breviarios collection of Fondo de Cultura Económica, Mexico, 1951. The book was also published by Emecé Editores, Buenos Aires, in 1978 and 1996.
2. Throughout these classes, Borges uses both “Hengest” and “Hengist” to refer to this legendary character. In order to facilitate matters, we will use “Hengest” throughout.
3. The two anthologies of mythology and legend of ancient Icelandic literature are called *Eddas*. The *Prose Edda*, or *Younger Edda*, was written around the year 1200 by the Icelandic historian Snorri Sturluson. It is a manual of Skaldic poetry. The first part, titled *Gylfaginning*, “The Tricking of Gylfi,” was translated by Borges into Spanish as *La alucinación de Gylfi* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1984). The second, titled *Skáldskaparmál*, or “The Language of Skaldic Poetry,” deals extensively with kennings. The third, titled *Háttatal* or “List of Verse Forms,” exemplifies the metric forms Snorri Sturluson knew. The *Poetic Edda*, or *Elder Edda*, written anonymously, is a collection of

heroic and mythological poems; though produced in the second half of the eighteenth century, the poems are much older. They were probably composed between the eighth and the eleventh centuries. The compilations done by Snorri Sturluson and the anonymous author of the *Poetic Edda* were responsible, to a large extent, for the preservation of Old Norse mythology, legends, and forms of poetic composition. In most other Germanic nations, this material has either completely disappeared or remained in an extremely fragmentary form. Borges laments more than once “the treatise on Saxon mythology that Bede did not write.” The *Eddas* constitute the most detailed and complete source of Germanic mythology that has survived to this day.

4. The Venerable Bede (673–735), Anglo-Saxon historian, theologian, and chronicler. He was one of the most erudite figures in Europe during the Middle Ages. His most famous work is *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, though he produced many other scientific, historical, and theological works. Bede spent most of his life at St. Paul’s Monastery in Jarrow and was known in his lifetime for his erudition as well as his pious character. In 1899, Bede was canonized; his saint’s day is May 25. Borges explores the fundamental aspects of his life in *Medieval Germanic Literature*, OCC, 882–85.

Borges is also referring here to Rædwald, King of East Anglia (d. ca. 624), who is believed to be buried in Sutton Hoo. The Venerable Bede writes, “Rædwald had long before been initiated into the mysteries of the Christian faith in Kent, but in vain; for on his return home, he was seduced by his wife and by certain evil teachers and perverted from the sincerity of his faith, so that his last state was worse than his first. After the manner of the ancient Samaritans, he seemed to be serving both Christ and

the gods whom he had previously served; in the same temple, he had one altar for the Christian sacrifice and another small altar on which to offer victims to devils." *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Book II, Chapter XV, ed. and trans. by Judith McClure and Roger Collins (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 98. This fragment seems to have particularly impressed Borges, for he includes it, with slight changes, under the title "*Por si acaso*" ["Just in Case"] in his book *Cuentos breves y extraordinarios* [*Extraordinary Tales*], written with Adolfo Bioy Casares.

5. Borges is referring to the four codices containing most of the Anglo-Saxon poetry that has survived to this day. The codices are: 1) *Cotton Vitellius A. xv*, in the collection of the British Museum and contains *Beowulf* and *Judith*; 2) *Junius 11*, in the Bodleian Library at Oxford University, which contains the poems "Genesis," "Exodus," "Daniel," and "Christ and Satan"; 3) *Codex Exoniensis* or *Exeter Book*, held at the cathedral of the same name, which contains the elegies, "The Wanderer," "The Seafarer," "The Ruin," some riddles, and several minor poems; 4) *Codex Vercellensis* or the *Vercelli Book*, which Borges mentions here, and is in the Vercelli cathedral, near Milan, and contains "The Dream of the Rood." In addition, there are approximately four hundred manuscripts of Anglo-Saxon prose texts, a fact Borges fails to mention here but which he explicitly mentions at the beginning of class 6.

6. A Spanish translation of the prose dialogue between Saturn and Solomon appears under the title "*Un diálogo anglosajón del siglo XI*" ["An Anglo-Saxon dialogue from the eleventh century"] in Borges's *Breve antología anglosajona* [*Brief Anglo-Saxon Anthology*], a book he wrote with María Kodama and

included in his *Obras completas en colaboración* [*Complete Collaborative Works*].

7. Borges is probably referring here to the *Dharma Shastras*, verses derived from the *Dharma Sutras* or “Hindu Law.” The *Dharma Sutras* are manuals of conduct and contain maxims that guide all aspects of human life—legal, social, ethical—from the religious point of view. They define, among other things, the caste system and each person’s role in society. The *Dharma Sutras* were originally written in prose but with time illustrative stanzas were added after each maxim. This finally led to codices that were written in verse, called the *Dharma Shastras*. Today this term is used to refer collectively to the rules and laws of the Hindu religion.

8. Borges develops this subject in his essay “*Las kenningar*,” from his *History of Eternity*. There he uses the Norse plural *kenningar*, whereas in these classes he preferred using the plural “kennings.”

9. The ancient Germanic inhabitants of England called their own language *englisc*. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, their language was called “Anglo-Saxon” from the Latin *anglo-saxonicus*. In 1872, the philologist Henry Sweet, in his preface to a collection of texts by King Alfred, explained that he would use the term “Old English” to refer to “the pure flexional state of the English language ... the barbarous and erroneous sense of Anglo-Saxon.” At the time Sweet wrote those words, English philology enjoyed an antiquarian prestige. The term “Old English” was meant to evoke—for patriotic as well as philological reasons—a cultural and linguistic continuum from the early Middle Ages to the current modern form of the English language.

10. *Chanson de Roland*, the most well-known of all the French *chansons de geste*, was written around the year 1100. It recounts the Battle of Roncesvalles in

the year 778 and the feats of Roland, a knight of Charlamagne's court. *Nibelungenlied* or *The Song of the Nibelungs* is an epic poem written in approximately 1200 in High German. Many of the facts and stories recounted in the poem, however, took place much earlier and appear in the *Völsungasaga* and the songs of the *Poetic Edda* or *Elder Edda* of Old Norse literature. Richard Wagner composed his *Ring Cycle* based on those three sources. Borges analyzed and translated parts of *The Song of the Nibelungs* in *Medieval Germanic Literature*, OCC, 910-15.

CLASS 2

- [1.](#) This is the first of three undated classes. Borges held classes on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. The first class was held on Friday, October 14, and the third on Monday, October 17. Classes were not held on Sundays. It is likely this class was held on Saturday, October 15, perhaps to make up for the class not held on Wednesday, October 12, which perhaps was a holiday, or on Wednesday, October 19, which had been cancelled.
- [2.](#) Luis de Góngora (1561-1627), Spanish Baroque lyric poet.
- [3.](#) See the section on the Norns in the *Book of Imaginary Beings*, OCC, 674.
- [4.](#) William Paton Ker (1855-1923), British scholar and writer, born in Glasgow. He taught at Cardiff, at University College London, and in 1920 was named professor at Oxford University. His works include *Epic and Romance* (1897), *The Dark Ages* (1904), and *The Art of Poetry* (1923).

5. In his *Medieval Germanic Literature*, Borges asserts that the *geatas* or Geats were “a nation in the south of Sweden, which some have identified with the Jutes and others with the Goths.” Friedrich Klaeber, in his edition of *Beowulf*, explains that the identity of the Geats “has been the subject of a prolonged controversy, which has manifold aspects: linguistic, geographic, historic, and literary. Grundtvig assigns the Geats to the island Gotland (or, for a second choice, Bornholm); Kemble assigned them to Angeln, Schleswig; Haigh (as a matter of course) to North England. But the only peoples who have been actually admitted as rival claimants to the title are the Jutes in the northern part of the Jutish peninsula, and those called in Old Norse *guatar*, in Old Swedish *gøtar*, i.e. the inhabitants of Västergötland and Östergötland, south of the great Swedish lakes. Phonetically, OE *geatas* answers precisely to ON *gautar*.” Friedrich Klaeber, *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, (Boston: D.C. Heath & Co., 1922) p. XLVI.
6. The fragment about Scyld Scefing can be found translated into Spanish by Borges in his *Brief Anglo-Saxon Anthology*, under the title “*Fragmento de la gesta de Beowulf*.”
7. By Percival Christopher Wren (1875–1941), published in 1924.

CLASS 3

1. In fact, *fus*, which means “frozen.” *Ond* means “and” in modern English.
2. See Class 2, note 4.
3. When the monks in Anglo-Saxon England began to write in Old English, they did so using the Latin alphabet. They had to deal, however, with two

consonant sounds that had no corollary in Latin. These are the interdental consonants that in modern English are written with th (for both the unvoiced consonant in “thin” and the voiced consonant of “this”). To represent those two sounds, scribes added two letters: they borrowed “thorn,” þ, from the Runic alphabet, and invented a new letter “eth,” ð, transformed from the Latin “d.” In Old English each of these two letters was used to represent both the unvoiced and the voiced consonants; they were interchangeable. In Late Old English, scribes tended to separate their use, writing þ at the beginning and s in all other positions. The letter ð was no longer used in Middle English; þ continued until the sixteenth century. Borges’s explanation shows that he remembers the name of the king in its original spelling (using the letter þ: Hroþgar), but he wanted to explain to his students how to write it using the letters they knew.

4. It is clear that here Borges gave several examples of the phonetic differences.
5. A character in the comedic plays of Plautus and Terence who bragged about his great feats in battle.
6. The Arimaspians are “men famous for having only one eye in the middle of their forehead. They live in perpetual war against the griffins, a species of winged monster, in order to steal from them the gold they extract from the bowels of the earth and that they defend with no less covetousness than the Arimaspians use to steal it from them.” Pliny, *Natural History*, VII, 2. This is quoted by Borges on the page he dedicates to one-eyed creatures in his *Book of Imaginary Beings*, OCC, 666.
7. Borges is referring to Jordanes’s *De origine actibusque Getarum*. Also known as *Getica*, it was written in the middle of the sixth century and based on a much more extensive work by Magnus Aurelius

Cassiodorus, which has been lost. The *Getica* preserves the legends the Goths told of their own Scandinavian origins; it is also a particularly valuable source of information on the Hun peoples. The work includes a detailed description of Attila's funeral, which Borges compares to Beowulf's.

[8.](#) The Finnsburh Fragment was translated into Spanish by Borges and published in his *Brief Anglo-Saxon Anthology*.

[9.](#) Ulfilas or Wulfilas, "the wolf cub" (ca. 311–83), Gothic bishop. Preached Arianism, a theological doctrine that denied the divinity of Christ and the consubstantiality of the Trinity. He is credited with the invention of the Gothic alphabet, which he used to produce the first translation of the Bible into a Germanic language. Philostorgus, the historian, as well as Socrates Scholasticus, the Byzantine, confirm that he translated the entire Bible; Philostorgus says that Ulfilas skipped the *Book of Kings* in order to avoid instigating the warrior nature of the Gothic tribes. Much of the material translated by Ulfilas, however, has been lost, and what has survived has reached us in fragments. The most important is the so-called *Codex Argenteus*, written in gold and silver lettering on purple parchment, preserved today in the library of the University of Uppsala in Sweden. Ulfilas worked as a missionary from the time of his consecration, around the year 341, until his death.

John Wycliff (ca. 1330–84), English theologian and philosopher, a forerunner of ecclesiastic reform. He believed the Church should give up its material possessions. Wycliff rebelled against papal authority and was opposed to the ecclesiastical magisterium. He maintained that the Bible was the only legitimate authority and initiated the first complete translation of the Bible into English.

10. Francis Palgrave (1788–1861), historian and founder of the Public Records Office. His works include *A History of England*, *The History of Normandy and England*, and *Truths and Fictions of the Middle Ages: the Merchant and the Friar*.

CLASS 4

1. Hrothgar's minstrel recites this story in *Beowulf*, lines 1063–59.
2. *Les Burgraves* was written by Victor Hugo around 1843.
3. The *Völsungasaga* is one of the *fornaldarsögur* or “sagas of ancient times.” Borges gives a summary of this saga in class 24, when he analyzes *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung*, by William Morris.
4. He is referring to Olaf Tryggvason (ca. 964–1000), who was king of Norway from around 995 until his death. The saga carrying his name belongs to the *Heimskringla*.
5. In Old English, as in Modern English, there were three third-person singular pronouns: *he* (written the same as in Modern English), *hit* (neuter), and *heo* (feminine). The plural pronoun was *hi* or *hie* for all three genders. These were replaced by “they,” “theirs,” and “them,” all of Norse origin.
6. Borges tells other anecdotes from this trip in his *Autobiografía*.
7. Cnut the Great (ca. 985–1035), king of Denmark, England, Sweden, and Norway.
8. The Vikings' voyages to lands that seem to be the east coast of North America are described in the *Saga of the Greenlanders* and the *Saga of Erik the Red*. At the beginning of the 1960s, the Norwegian explorer Helge Ingstad discovered a Viking settlement in

L'Anse aux Meadows, at the northernmost tip of Newfoundland, Canada. Antón and Pedro Casariego Córdoba [the Spanish editors and translators] write that there were "eight houses, one of them large ... several rusty needles, a piece of a Nordic-type bone needle, a lamp made of stone of the same type as those in medieval Iceland, and a small ironmonger shop with a stone anvil, an oven for extracting iron from minerals, slag, pieces of molten iron, and a piece of copper." Archeological dating as well as the presence of iron smelting and the architecture prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that there were Vikings in America around the year 1000, approximately five centuries before Christopher Columbus arrived in the New World.

[9.](#) Borges is referring to the so-called Varangian Guard, organized at the end of the tenth century by Emperor Basil II. Famous for its fearlessness, its ferocity in battle, and its loyalty to the emperor, the Varangians or *Væringjar* were the best-paid soldiers of the empire; serving in this guard was an honor that proffered a lifetime of great prestige and wealth.

[10.](#) Viking seafarers occupied these islands in the eighth and ninth centuries.

[11.](#) Borges is referring to the Viking expeditions to the Holy Land. This "traveler" or "pilgrim to Jerusalem" is Sigurd "Jórsalafari" Magnusson (ca. 1090–1130), son of King Magnus III. *Jórsalir* was the name the Vikings gave to Jerusalem; the Norse word *fari* means "traveler" or "pilgrim." According to *Heimskringla*, Sigurd Magnusson left Norway for Spain with sixty ships in the year 1107. He stopped in Lisbon, Gibraltar, and Sicily before arriving in Palestine in 1110. For more information, see *Saga of Sigurd the Pilgrim*, in *Heimskringla* or the *Chronicle of the Kings of Norway*, by Snorri Sturluson, or the anonymous *Orkneyinga Saga*.

[12.](#) Borges is surely referring here to the extravagant adventures of a Viking named Hastein, recounted by Benoît de Saint-Maure and by the chronicler Dudo of Saint-Quentin in his work *De moribus et actis primorum Normanniae ducum*. The story is of a legendary nature, and it is unlikely that it contains any historical truth.

[13.](#) The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is a collection of annals chronicling the events that took place in medieval England. The original chronicle is thought to have been compiled during the reign of Alfred the Great (871–99). Since then, several other copies have been in circulation, each different according to their geographic locations. The manuscripts are different, all having incorporated material of local interest. Six of these manuscripts have been preserved and are designated by letters of the alphabet. The relationship among them is so complex that several authors assert that instead of talking about a single *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, it would be preferable to use the plural. The “Battle of Brunanburh” appears in the annals from the year 937. The last annals, from the year 1154, appear in the Peterborough Chronicle (E) and tell of the death of King Stephen.

[14.](#) At the end of 1876, Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote his version of “The Battle of Brunanburh” based on the prose translation by his son, Hallam, which had appeared in *Contemporary Review* in November of that year.

[15.](#) The Anglo-Saxon appendix includes Tennyson’s translation of “The Battle of Brunanburh.”

[16.](#) The Battle of Brunanburh took place in the year 937.

[17.](#) Borges’s great-grandfather, Colonel Isidoro Suárez, took part in the Battle of Junín, on August 6, 1824, leading a famous Peruvian and Colombian cavalry

attack, which was decisive in the outcome of the battle.

[18.](#) Borges alternately refers to this character as Anlaf and Olaf. For the sake of simplicity, here and elsewhere we will always use Anlaf, the name Borges uses in his summary of the poem in *Medieval Germanic Literature*, OCC, 885-86.

[19.](#) *Egil's Saga* includes the story of the Battle of Vinheid (ch. 54), in which Egil and his brother Thorolf fight under the Saxon king Athelstan. Some authors, including Borges, claim that the Battle of Vinheid is the same as that of Brunanburh, but many doubts remain. *Egil's Saga* is included in volume 72 of *Biblioteca personal* (Hyspamérica editions), published at the beginning of 1986, a collection of Borges's favorite books with his prologues.

[20.](#) This line and the others in this paragraph are from Tennyson's translation.

CLASS 5

[1.](#) The Battle of Maldon took place on August 10 or 11, 991. (Medieval sources differ as to the exact date.)

[2.](#) Æthelred II, called *Unræd*, later "the Unready" (968-1016). He became king in 978. The name Æthelred means "noble counsel." Shortly after he became king, Æthelred suffered from waves of Viking attacks. He responded with measures that were both unpopular and futile. Making a pun of his name, his contemporaries nicknamed him *Unræd*, which actually means "poorly counseled" or "maker of bad decisions."

[3.](#) In the offer of the Viking messenger (*beagas wið gebeorge*, "rings in exchange for peace") as in Byrhnōth's response (*To heanlic me þinceð þæt ge*

mid urum sceattum to scype gangon unbefohtene, “I think it would be shameful for us to let you go with our riches to your ships without confronting you”), the words *beagas* (bracelets, rings) and *sceattas* (the term for Anglo-Saxon silver coins, but probably at the time a weight measure) can also mean, in the poetic sense, “riches” generally. Money did circulate, but tributes to the Vikings were paid in a combination of gold, silver, jewels, rings, and coins, and anything else at hand.

[4.](#) There is no Godric in the Finnsburh Fragment. Perhaps Borges is confusing this name with Guthere, Garulf, or Guthlaf, all of whom appear in that poem.

[5.](#) The original title of this novel in Swedish is *Röde Orm*. It was originally published in two volumes in 1941 and 1945, and its author, Frans Gunnar Bengtsson (1894– 1954), was a poet, novelist, and essayist. The chapter Borges is referring to is the first of the second part and is called “Concerning the battle that was fought at Maldon, and what came after it.”

[6.](#) *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, by R. K. Gordon, volume 794 of Everyman’s Library.

[7.](#) Borges is commenting on a passage from Book IV of *Historia Ecclesiastica*, which tells the story of Caedmon. It can be found in *Medieval Germanic Literature*, OCC, 881.

[8.](#) Caedmon’s “mediocre” verses are the following:

Nu sculon herigean	heofonrices weard,
meotodes meahte	and his modgepanc,
weorc wuldorfæder,	swa he wundra gehwæs,
ece drihten,	or onstealde.
He ærest sceop	eorðan bearnum
heofon to hrofe,	halig scyppend;
þa middangeard	moncynnes weard,
ece drihten,	æfter teode
firum foldan,	frea ælmihtig.

[9.](#) “Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son, / Turbulent fleshy, sensual, eat- ing, drinking, and

breeding.” Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself” XXIV, from *Leaves of Grass*.

[10.](#) The poem is titled “Salut au Monde!” and belongs to the section “Calamus” of *Leaves of Grass*.

[11.](#) Pierre de Ronsard (1524–1585), French poet.

[12.](#) Leopoldo Lugones Argüello (1874–1938), Argentine writer and journalist.

[13.](#) In lines 797–807 of the poem titled “Christ,” the letters of the name of Cynewulf are woven into the story of the final judgment. Using a similar method, Cynewulf also “signed” the following poems: “Elena,” “Juliana,” and “The Fate of the Apostles.” Cynewulf’s identity remains cloaked in mystery. The author of these poems has been identified as: Cenwulf, abbot of Peterborough (d. 1006); Cynewulf, bishop of Lindisfarne (d. 782); and Cynwulf, a priest from Dunwich.

[14.](#) See the appendix for the Runic alphabet.

[15.](#) The British Cemetery, at 4568 El Cano Avenue, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

[16.](#) A section of this elegy has been translated by Borges and appears in his *Brief Anglo-Saxon Anthology* with the title “*El navegante*.”

[17.](#) From “Sonatina,” by the Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío (1867–1916).

[18.](#) Following are the first lines of Pound’s translation with the Old English original:

Mæg ic be me sylfum	soðgied wrecan,
sipas secgan,	hu ic geswincdagum
earfoðhwile	oft þrowade,
bitre breostceare	gebiden hæbbe,
gecunnad in ceole	cearselda fela,
atol ypa gewearc,	þær mec oft bigeat
nearo nihtwaco	æt nacan stefnan,
þonne he be clifum cnossað.	Calde geþrunge
wæron mine fet,	forste gebunden

May I for my own self song’s truth reckon,
Journey’s jargon, how I in harsh days

Hardship endured oft.
Bitter breast-cares have I abided,
Known on my keel many a care's hold,
And dire sea-surge, and there I oft spent
Narrow nightwatch nigh the ship's head
While she tossed close to cliffs. Coldly afflicted,
My feet were by frost benumbed.

CLASS 6

1. Borges refers to this spell on the page dedicated to the valkyries (OCC, 708) as well as the one dedicated to the elves (OCC, 624) in his *Book of Imaginary Beings*.
2. *Ese* in Old English is *Æsir* in Old Norse.
3. The letter to Cangrande della Scala of Verona is the last of Dante's surviving letters. It was written around the year 1303 and is important because it includes a commentary on *The Divine Comedy* by the author himself. Until 1920, the letter was considered apocryphal, until a group of Italian and international scholars and critics established its authenticity through exhaustive analysis.
4. William Langland (ca. 1332–1440), English poet and putative author of *Piers Plowman*.
5. Stefan George (1868–1933), German poet.
6. Borges includes a translation of this poem in his book *Medieval Germanic Literature*, OCC, 877–78. Bath, called *Aquae Sulis* by the Romans, is next to the Avon River. The ruins of the thermal baths are a modern archeological and tourist attraction.
7. The poet's rhetorical questions, the wind that blows through the rooms, and the shapes of serpents carved into the walls do not in fact belong to the poem "The Ruin," but rather to a passage of similar

themes and tones in “The Wanderer.” Both poems include descriptions of ruins and walls eroded by time.

[8.](#) This poem was translated by Borges into Spanish and appears in *Brief Anglo-Saxon Anthology* under the simple title “Deor.”

[9.](#) Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, Canto III, *Hell*, lines 1–3 and 10.

[10.](#) “Beam” in modern English is related to the German word *baum*, which has the same meaning.

[11.](#) The *Chronicle of the Kings of Norway* (or *Heimskringla*) was written by Snorri Sturluson at the beginning of the eighteenth century. It consists of sixteen sagas, each corresponding to a sovereign who occupied the throne of Norway between 850 and 1177. As Borges explains, the first page is missing from the first codex of this work. The second page begins with the words “*Kringla Heimsins*,” which means “the round ball of the world.” For this reason the codex was called *Kringla Heimsins* or *Kringla* or *Heimskringla*. Two random words became the title of the work, two words that nonetheless imply the vastness of its scope.” Jorge Luis Borges, *Medieval Germanic Literature*, OCC, 960.

CLASS 7

[1.](#) Bestiaries, also called *Physiologus*, enjoyed enormous popularity during the Middle Ages. They consisted of forty-eight sections, each of which described attributes or habits of beings that were real or imaginary, and served to exemplify Christian virtues, creating biblical allegories about sins or deviations from faith. Bestiaries were translated into many languages and circulated for more than fifteen

centuries; all the translations descended from the Greek original, which was supposed to have been written in Alexandria in the second century. The word, *physiologus*, means “naturalist,” and is used as the title of the bestiary, but it actually corresponds to the author or the original source of the book.

2. Borges refers to the Anglo-Saxon poem about the panther in his *Book of Imaginary Beings*, OCC, 679.
3. This is actually the twentieth line in the poem “Gerontion,” which is not in *Four Quartets*, as Borges thought, but rather in the book *Poems* (1920). The stanza reads as follows: “Signs are taken for wonders. ‘We would see a sign!’ / The word within a word, unable to speak a word, / Swaddled with darkness. In the juvescence of the year / Came Christ the tiger.”
4. “Fastitocalon” is a corruption of the Greek *aspidochelone*, from *aspís*, “shield,” and *chelone*, “turtle.” The word was further corrupted with each successive translation and copy of the bestiary. Borges offers a summary of the poem of the whale on the pages dedicated to Fastitocalon in his *Book of Imaginary Beings*, OCC, 628.
5. Borges analyzes the origin of this legend on the page about “Zaratán” in his *Book of Imaginary Beings*, OCC, 711. There, he also mentions the Anglo-Saxon poem about the whale and translates a fragment of the *Voyage of St. Brendan*.
6. Saint Brendan the Voyager (ca. 486–578) founded several monasteries and churches, the most famous of which is in Clonfert, where he is buried. The work that tells of his legendary voyage to the Promised Land and his encounter with the whale described by Borges is called *Navigatio Sancti Brandani* or *Voyage of St. Brendan*.
7. “...or that sea-beast / Leviathan, which God of all his works / Created hugest that swim the ocean-stream /

Him, haply, slumbering on the Norway foam..." (John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book I.)

- [8.](#) An imaginary beast with the body of a lion and the head and wings of an eagle. Borges devotes a page to the griffin in his *Book of Imaginary Beings*, OCC, 639.
- [9.](#) Borges included six of his translations of these Anglo-Saxon riddles—about fish, the garlic seller, the swan, the bookmoth, the chalice, the sun, and the moon—in *Medieval Germanic Literature*, OCC, 890-91.
- [10.](#) See the page about the Sphinx in *Book of Imaginary Beings*, OCC, 627.
- [11.](#) Robert K. Gordon, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (New York: Dutton Books, 1954).
- [12.](#) Jorge Manrique (1440-1479), a major Spanish poet whose main work is *Coplas a la muerte de su padre* (*Stanzas about the Death of his Father*). See appendix for Longfellow's translation of "The Grave."
- [13.](#) This poem was translated into Spanish by Borges and published in his *Brief Anglo-Saxon Anthology*.
- [14.](#) This story, which appears in several collections of stories by Eduardo Wilde, was included by Borges in his collection *Cuentistas y pintores argentinos* [*Argentine painters and short-story writers*], Ediciones de Arte Gaglianone, 1985. Eduardo Wilde (1844-1913) was one of the most prominent intellectual figures of his time in Argentina.
- [15.](#) Alfonso Reyes (1889-1959), Mexican writer, philosopher, and diplomat.
- [16.](#) Borges includes this book by Leopoldo Lugones as volume 12 in his collection *Biblioteca personal*.
- [17.](#) In Old English, *cnif*.
- [18.](#) William the Conqueror (ca.1028-87), duke of Normandy and king of England after he defeated the Saxon king Harold at Hastings in the year 1066.

[19.](#) King Alfred (849–99), known as Alfred the Great. From the moment of his coronation as king of Wessex in 871, Alfred was forced to confront constant threats from Viking invaders. In the year 878, the Danes captured Wessex, and Alfred was forced to flee. But he returned soon thereafter and defeated the invaders at Eddington. In the year 886, Alfred and the Danes signed the Treaty of Wedmore, which established the partition of England. The north and east of the island remained under Danish control, but in exchange, Alfred was able to extend his domain beyond the border of Wessex, thereby King Guthrum converted to Christianity. Alfred never ruled over all of England, but his reforms and military victories marked the beginning of a territorial consolidation that allowed his successors to carry out the unification of Anglo-Saxon England.

[20.](#) This episode appears in *King Harald's Saga*, part II, chapter 94, of *Heimskringla*, by Snorri Sturluson.

[21.](#) Borges is probably referring here to James Lewis Farley (1823–85), English writer and journalist, born in Dublin. He was consul to Turkey in Bristol and contributed to the improvement of relations between Turkey and England. Some of his works include: *Two Years Travel in Syria*, *The Massacres in Syria*, *New Bulgaria*, *The Druses and the Maronites*, *Modern Turkey*, *The Resources of Turkey*, and *Egypt, Cyprus and Asiatic Turkey*.

[22.](#) Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241), Icelandic poet, scholar, and historian, was the most famous medieval writer of Iceland. He wrote *Heimskringla* or *Chronicle of the Kings of Norway* and *Prose Edda* or *Younger Edda*. *Egil's Saga* is also attributed to him. Snorri Sturluson studied in Oddi under the tutelage of Jon Loptsson, and was not only the most outstanding scholar of his time but also probably the man of most noble lineage in all of Iceland. In addition to

scholarship, Snorri was interested in wealth and power, and lacked neither. He participated in political intrigues involving the king of Norway, Haakon IV, and promised to give Iceland to his crown; then—for reasons no longer fully understood—he delayed turning it over to him for a long time. As Borges points out, Snorri Sturluson’s life has been described as “a complex chronicle of betrayals.” In the year 1241, after being snubbed by Snorri Sturluson, King Haakon lost his patience and ordered his assassination. Borges explores these fundamental aspects of his life in *Medieval Germanic Literature*, OCC, 950–51. See also Borges’s prologue to his translation of the first part of the *Prose Edda* or *Younger Edda*, titled *Gylfaginning* or *The Tricking of Gylfi*.

[23.](#) The famous movie by Sergei M. Eisenstein, first shown in 1938.

[24.](#) The “ancient English chronicle” mentioned by Borges is the *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, or *The History of the English Kings*, written by the English historian William de Malmesbury (ca.1090–1143) around the year 1125.

CLASS 8

[1.](#) Jerónimo Lobo (1596–1678), a Portuguese Jesuit. He joined the Jesuit Order in Lisbon and devoted his life to being a missionary.

[2.](#) Decimus Junius Juvenalis (ca. 60–140), Latin poet. The two poems by Samuel Johnson mentioned by Borges were inspired by his work. “London: A Poem,” from 1738, is based on Juvenal’s Satire 3. “The Vanity of Human Wishes,” from 1749, is modeled after Satire 10.

3. Paul Groussac (1848–1929), Argentine writer born in France.
4. Published in 1755.
5. Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux (1636–1711), French poet and critic.
6. This English–Italian Dictionary was published in 1598 by the lexicographer and translator Giovanni Florio (1553–1652).
7. Noah Webster (1758–1843), American lexicographer. In 1806, Webster published his *Compendious Dictionary of the English Language*, and in 1828, *An American Dictionary*, a much more exhaustive dictionary.
8. Borges is probably remembering line 48 of the poem, “The Vanity of Human Wishes,” in which Johnson talks about the hardships endured by anyone who chooses the profession of writer. In the first edition of this poem, from 1749, Johnson wrote the line, “Toil, Envy, Want, the Garret, and the Jail.” After his bitter experience with Lord Chesterfield, who refused to help him, Johnson changed the poem, substituting “garret” with “patron” in his list of ills: “Toil, Envy, Want, the Patron, and the Jail.”

CLASS 9

1. When Johnson began his dictionary, he approached Lord Chesterfield as a potential patron, but Chesterfield gave him only a token sum. Seven years later, after Johnson had completed his task, Lord Chesterfield published two essays in the *World* magazine, in which he congratulated him. Johnson replied by publishing a letter in which he reminded him of his prior attitude, writing, among other things, “Is not a patron, my lord, one who looks with

unconcern on a man struggling for life in the water, and, when he has reached ground, encumbers him with help?"

The Rambler, was a two-penny sheet of essays Johnson published for several years.

2. Samuel Johnson, *La historia de Raselas, príncipe de Abisinia*, translation and prologue by Mariano de Vedia y Mitre (Buenos Aires: Editorial Guillermo Kraft Limitada [Colección Vértice]), 1951.

3. The manuscript that tells of Father Lobo's experiences in Abyssinia, originally written in Portuguese, wasn't published until it was translated into French by Abad Legrand. Legrand's translation was published in 1728 with the title: *Voyage historique d'Abissinie du R.P. Jerome Lobo de la Compagnie de Jesus; traduit du Portugais; continuée et augm. de plusieurs dissertations, lettres et memoires par M. Le Grand*.

4. "Barlaam and Josaphat" is a Christian adaptation of the legend of Buddha, written in Greek in the seventh century by a monk named Juan of the Sabbas monastery near Jerusalem. This work was widely read in the Middle Ages and influenced many Spanish-language writers, among them Lope de Vega, Raimundo Lulio, and Don Juan Manuel.

5. Alfonso Reyes (1889-1959), Mexican writer, philosopher, and diplomat. This passage can be found in an essay called "*Un precursor teórico de la aviación en el siglo XVII.*"

6. Antoine Galland (1646-1715), French Orientalist and scholar. He is best known for his French adaptation of *The Arabian Nights*, titled *Mille et une Nuits*, a free adaptation based on Syrian manuscripts. Borges critiques and compares the many translations of this work in his essay, "The Translators of the 1001 Nights," in *A History of Eternity* (1936). Borges also includes a selection of Galland's translation as

volume 52 in his *Biblioteca personal* from Hyspamérica.

[7.](#) One of the three divisions of Ancient Egypt, also called Upper Egypt, whose capital was Thebes. At the end of the third century, the first Christian hermits took refuge in the desert in the western part of this region to escape persecution by the Romans.

[8.](#) Sir Thomas Browne (1605–82). He wrote *Religio medici* around 1635. His other works include *Pseudodoxia epidemic* (1646), *Urn Burial* (1658), and, mentioned here below, *The Garden of Cyrus* (1658).

This sentence can be found in one of the last paragraphs of *The Garden of Cyrus*. In this passage, the author comments on how deceptive the images of plants in dreams can be, and mentions that dreaming impoverishes the sense of smell: “Beside *Hippocrates* hath spoke so little and the Oneirocriticall Masters, have left such frigid Interpretations from plants, that there is little encouragement to dream of Paradise it self. Nor will the sweetest delight of Gardens afford much comfort in sleep; wherein the dulnesse of that sense shakes hands with delectable odours; and though in the Bed of *Cleopatra*, can hardly with any delight raise up the ghost of a Rose” (chapter V).

[9.](#) In chapter 32 of *Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia*.

[10.](#) Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), German philosopher and mathematician.

[11.](#) Thomas Babington Macaulay’s comments are, in a fact, a double-edged sword. In Thomas Macaulay’s review of John Croker’s new edition of James Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* (which appeared in September 1831), Macaulay states that Boswell was an imbecile who happened to have a good memory. In spite of this, his encounter with Johnson led to the best biography every written. “We are not sure that there is in the whole history of the human intellect so strange a phænomenon as this book. Many of the greatest men

that ever lived have written biography. Boswell was one of the smallest men that ever lived, and he has beaten them all. He was, if we are to give any credit to his own account or to the united testimony of all who knew him, a man of the meanest and feeblest intellect."

CLASS 10

1. From *Sartor Resartus*, chapter VIII: "Could anything be more miraculous than an actual authentic Ghost? The English Johnson longed, all his life, to see one; but could not, though he went to Cock Lane, and thence to the church-vaults, and tapped on coffins. Foolish Doctor! Did he never, with the mind's eye as well as with the body's, look round him into that full tide of human Life he so loved; did he never so much as look into Himself? The good Doctor was a Ghost, as actual and authentic as heart could wish; well-nigh a million of Ghosts were travelling the streets by his side. Once more I say, sweep away the illusion of Time; compress the threescore years into three minutes: what else was he, what else are we? Are we not Spirits, that are shaped into a body, into an Appearance; and that fade away again into air and Invisibility? This is no metaphor, it is a simple scientific *fact*: we start out of Nothingness, take figure, and are Apparitions; round us, as round the veriest spectre, is Eternity; and to Eternity minutes are as years and aeons."

2. John Stuart (1713-92), Third Earl of Bute, British statesman born in Edinburgh, Scotland. He was the tutor and personal friend to George III. When George II acceded to the throne, he received a position in his court, and was named Secretary of State, and in

1762, Prime Minister. He quickly became very unpopular, however, and was forced to resign in 1763.

[3.](#) Pasquale di Paoli (1725-1807), leader of the struggle for Corsican independence, first against Genoa and then against France. Boswell took a six-week trip to Corsica in 1765 to interview Di Paoli, with whom he established a long friendship.

[4.](#) “Mr. Thomas Davies, the actor, who then kept a bookseller’s shop in Russell Street, Covent Garden” (*The Life of Samuel Johnson*, by James Boswell).

[5.](#) See note 12 from Class 9 above. Thomas Babington Macaulay, Baron of Rothley (1800-59), English historian, politician, and essayist. Macaulay’s essay appeared in September 1831, in response to John Wilson Croker’s edition of Boswell’s biography.

[6.](#) In his 1831 review of *Life of Johnson*, Macaulay writes: “Those weaknesses which most men keep covered up in the most secret places of the mind, not to be disclosed to the eye of friendship or of love, were precisely the weaknesses which Boswell paraded before all the world. He was perfectly frank, because the weakness of his understanding and the tumult of his spirits prevented him from knowing when he made himself ridiculous.... His fame is great; and it will, we have no doubt be lasting; but it is fame of a peculiar kind, and indeed marvellously resembles infamy.”

[7.](#) The phrase “whose name I do not wish to recall” is probably a take on the first sentence of *Don Quixote*.

[8.](#) Leopoldo Lugones Argüello (1874-1938) was an Argentine writer.

[9.](#) This would have been accompanied by a gesture.

[10.](#) Paul Valéry (1871-1945), French poet and critic.

[11.](#) This phrase is found in Book VIII of Pope’s translation of the *Iliad*.

- [12.](#) First published in two volumes in 1791 under the title *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*
- [13.](#) Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723–92), English painter born in Devon, Great Britain. He painted portraits of important persons of his era. In 1768, Reynolds was named first president of the Royal Academy of Arts, and in 1784, Principal Painter in Ordinary to the King. Oliver Goldsmith (1728–74), Anglo-Irish playwright, novelist, and poet.
- [14.](#) Miguel de Unamuno (1864–1936), Spanish writer and philosopher.
- [15.](#) From *All's well that ends well*, act 4, scene 3.
- [16.](#) Henri L. Bergson (1859–1941), French philosopher.
- [17.](#) Joseph Wood Krutch (1893–1970), North American naturalist, conservationist, writer, and critic. He wrote a biography of Johnson in 1944, and taught at Columbia University from 1937–52. His autobiography, *More Lives Than One*, was published in 1962.
- [18.](#) Selections of Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* are found in volume 27 of *Biblioteca personal*. Arnold Toynbee (1889–1975), English historian.

CLASS 11

- [1.](#) Oswald Spengler (1880–1936), German philosopher. The work Borges is referring to, whose original title in German is *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, was published in two volumes between 1918 and 1922.
From *The Decline of the West*, volume 2, part 1, chapter IV.
- [2.](#) Gray's poem titled "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" was first published in 1751. The poem was inspired by the graveyard of the church in Stoke

Podges in Buckinghamshire, England, where Gray himself is buried.

[3.](#) José Antonio Miralla (1789–1825), Argentine poet and fighter for independence, born in Cordoba, Argentina. When in England, he did an admirable translation into Spanish of Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard." Among his works are also included *A la Muerte de Mr. William Winston*, *La Libertad*, and *La Palomilla Ausente*.

[4.](#) Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803), German philosopher.

[5.](#) Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer (1836–1870), a Spanish post-romantic writer of poetry and stories, is a major figure of Spanish literature. Heinrich Heine (1797–1856), German poet and essayist.

[6.](#) Corrientes is a province in northeast Argentina. Guaraní is spoken by communities there.

[7.](#) By James Macpherson, published in 1760.

[8.](#) He is referring to Hugh Blair (1718–1800), a famous priest, friend of Alexander Carlyle, Adam Ferguson, Adam Smith, and James Macpherson, for whom Blair wrote *A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian, the Son of Fingal* (1763). The book of rhetoric Borges is referring to is *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, published in 1783 and used as a textbook until well into the nineteenth century.

[9.](#) *Fingal: Ancient Epic Poem in Six Books* was published in 1762. One year later, Macpherson published a supposedly new collection of Celtic legends and poems called *Temora: An Ancient Epic Poem in Eight Books*.

[10.](#) Johannes Scotus Eriugena (ca. 830–880), Irish philosopher and theologian.

[11.](#) "The English park with its atmospheric suggestion, which supplanted the French about 1750 and abandoned the great perspective idea of the latter in favour of the "Nature" of Addison, Pope and

sensibility, introduced into its stock of motives perhaps the most astonishing bizarrerie ever perpetrated, the artificial ruin, in order to deepen the historical character in the presented landscape,” Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West* (Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 134.

[12.](#) The word *Borges* is referring to is probably “baritus,” a term used by Tacitus in his *Germania*. “They say that Hercules, too, once visited them; and when going into battle, they sing of him first of all heroes. They have also those songs of theirs, by the recital of which (‘baritus,’ they call it), they rouse their courage, while from the note they augur the result of the approaching conflict. For, as their line shouts, they inspire or feel alarm. It is not so much an articulate sound, as a general cry of valor.” *The Agricola and Germania*, trans. A. J. Church and W. J. Brodribb (London: Macmillan, 1877), 87–110. The origin of this word is unknown. It has been associated with the Celtic bards, as well as the sounds made by elephants.

[13.](#) Melchiorre Cesarotti (1730–1808), Italian poet and essayist. His verse translation of Macpherson’s work is called *Poesie di Ossian* (1763–72).

[14.](#) Macpherson’s texts also attracted the romantic musicians. Between 1815 and 1817, the celebrated Austrian, Franz Schubert, put to music more than ten long texts of Ossian, which came to him in German translations by E. Baron de Harold. In a newspaper article as late as 1843, the German composer Robert Schumann (who was also a writer) mentioned the premier of an overture dedicated to Ossian, *Nachklänge aus Ossian*, by the young Danish composer Niels Gade.

[15.](#) *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765). The author, whom *Borges* mentions below, was the

English scholar and bishop Thomas Percy (1729–1811), not Gray.

CLASS 12

1. Alfonso Reyes (1889–1959), Mexican writer and diplomat. Miguel de Unamuno (1864–1936), Spanish writer and philosopher.
2. Thomas Quincey (1785–1859), known as De Quincey, British writer.
3. Borges is probably remembering lines 238–68 of *The Recluse, Part First, Book First, Home at Grasmere*. Wordsworth writes: “... But two are missing, two, a lonely pair / Of milk-white Swans; wherefore are they not seen / Partaking this day’s pleasure,” then offers the explanation of the Dalesmen’s tube as a possible explanation.
4. The sonnet is titled “Composed upon Westminster Bridge” from September 3, 1802. “Earth has not anything to show more fair: / Dull would he be of soul who could pass by / A sight so touching in its majesty: / This City now doth, like a garment, wear / The beauty of the morning; silent, bare, / Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie / Open unto the fields, and to the sky; / All bright and glittering in the smokeless air. / Never did sun more beautifully steep / In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill; / Ne’er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep! / The river glideth at his own sweet will: / Dear God! the very houses seem asleep; / *And all that mighty heart is lying still!*”
5. The untitled sonnet begins with the line, “With shops the sea was sprinkled far and nigh.” Borges quotes from this poem again toward the end of the class. See note 13 for the entire sonnet.

6. The poem was composed between 1802 and 1806 and first published in 1807. Borges quotes from the fourth line, which actually reads “The glory and the freshness of a dream,” inadvertently changing the order of the words. We mustn’t forget that he is speaking from memory, without notes.

7. The passage is in the fifth, not second book.

8. Borges does not finish the sentence.

9. The title of the poem is “The Solitary Reaper,” and was written between 1803 and 1805 and published in 1807. The text reads as follows: “Behold her, single in the field, / Yon solitary Highland Lass! / Reaping and singing by herself; / Stop here, or gently pass! / Alone she cuts and binds the grain, / And sings a melancholy strain; / O listen! for the Vale profound / Is overflowing with the sound. // No Nightingale did ever chaunt / More welcome notes to weary bands / Of travellers in some shady haunt, / Among Arabian sands: / A voice so thrilling ne’er was heard / In springtime from the Cuckoo-bird, / Breaking the silence of the seas / Among the farthest Hebrides. // Will no one tell me what she sings?— / Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow / For old, unhappy, far-off things, / And battles long ago: / Or is it some more humble lay, Familiar matter of to-day? / Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain, / That has been, and may be again? // Whate’er the theme, the Maiden sang / As if her song could have no ending; / I saw her singing at her work, / And o’er the sickle bending;— / I listened, motionless and still; / And, as I mounted up the hill / The music in my heart I bore, / Long after it was heard no more.”

10. The sonnet, titled “November, 1806,” was written in 1806 and published the following year. It reads as follows: “Another year!—another deadly blow! / Another mighty Empire overthrown! / And We are left, or shall be left, alone / The last that dare to struggle

with the Foes. / 'Tis well! from this day forward we shall know / That in ourselves our safety must be sought; / That by our own right hands it must be wrought; / That we must stand un propped, or be laid low. / O dastard whom such foretaste doth not cheer! / We shall exult, if they who rule the land / Be men who hold its many blessings dear, / Wise, upright, valiant; not a servile band, / Who are to judge of danger which they fear, / And honour which they do not understand."

11. Borges is remembering lines 58–63 of "Book Third" of *The Prelude*: "And from my pillow, looking forth by light / Of moon or favouring stars, I could behold / The antechapel where the statue stood / Of Newton with his prism and silent face, / The marble index of a mind for ever / Voyaging through strange seas of thought, alone."

12. See note 1.

13. This line comes from Wordsworth's untitled sonnet mentioned in note 7 in this same class: "With Ships the sea was sprinkled far and nigh, / Like stars in heaven, and joyously it showed; / Some lying fast at anchor in the road, / Some veering up and down, one knew not why. / A goodly Vessel did I then espy / Come like a Giant from a haven broad; / And lustily along the bay she strode, / Her tackling rich, and of apparel high. / The Ship was nought to me, nor I to her, / Yet I pursued her with a Lover's look; / This Ship to all the rest did I prefer: / When will she turn, and whither? She will brook / No tarrying; where She comes the winds must stir: / On went She, and due north her journey took."

CLASS 13

1. This story first appeared in the magazine *The Yellow Book* in July 1894, and was first published in the book *Terminations*, in London by Heinemann and in New York by Harper in 1895.
2. Martino Dobrizhoffer (1717-91), Austrian Jesuit. He worked as a minister among the Abipones, a tribe north of the Guaraní zone, along with Father Florian Baucke or Paucke in the middle of the eighteenth century. The original version of his book is written in Latin and consists of three volumes. It is called *Historia de Abiponibus: equestri bellicosaque Paraquariae natione*. It was published in Vienna by Josph Nob de Kurzbek in 1784, translated into German the same year, then into English in 1822. A copy of the original Latin can be found in the *Sala del Tesoro* of the National Library in Buenos Aires.
3. Originally published in 1817.
4. Coleridge studied at Christ's Hospital, not at Christ Church.
5. *The Fall of Robespierre* was first published in 1794. *Joan of Arc* (1796) is actually an epic poem.
6. Borges refers to Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" as "The Ancient Mariner" throughout.
7. According to John Spencer Hill, "The entire *Biographia*, written as it was in under four months, shows signs of hasty composition; but nowhere has this haste left more clearly defined marks than in chapters 12 and 13, the last to be composed, in September 1815. As has long been known, chapter 12 of the *Biographia Literaria* consists largely of extended passages of translation, some of them verbatim and none of them acknowledged, from F.W.J. Schelling's *Abhandlungen zur Erläuterung des Idealismus der Wissenschaftslehre and System des transcendentalen Idealismus*. Chapter 12 is not the only place, nor is Schelling the only German philosopher from whom Coleridge plagiarises in the

course of *Biographia Literaria*; but the fact remains that the bulk of unacknowledged borrowings in the book appear in this chapter, which Coleridge must have composed with Schelling's works open before him. Speed of execution will not, of course, excuse such behaviour (the case for exculpation rests on other and more complex proofs), but it surely does go a long way toward explaining why the borrowings are so extensive at this particular point." *A Coleridge Companion* (New York: Macmillan Press, 1985), p. 218.

[8.](#) Macedonio Fernández (1874–1952), Argentine writer, humorist, and philosopher.

[9.](#) Amado Nervo (1870–1919), Mexican poet.

[10.](#) Johannes Scotus Eriugena (815–77), Irish theologian, philosopher, and poet.

[11.](#) In Chapter 15 of his *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge asserts "that Shakespeare, no mere child of nature; no *automaton* of genius; no passive vehicle of inspiration, possessed by the spirit, not possessing it; first studied patiently, meditated deeply, understood minutely, till knowledge, become habitual and intuitive, wedded itself to his habitual feelings, and at length gave birth to that stupendous power ... attracts all forms and things to himself, into the unity of his own ideal.... Shakespeare becomes all things, yet for ever remaining himself."

[12.](#) As well as a son, whom Borges fails to mention.

[13.](#) See Class 8, note 3.

CLASS 14

[1.](#) *Everyman* is one of the morality plays of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that deal with the urgent need to repent, the ephemerality of life, and

the fate of the human soul in God's hands. Probably based on a Flemish original, *Everyman* was written around the year 1495.

[2.](#) *The Golden Book of Coleridge*, edited by Stopford A. Brooke, volume 43 of *Everyman's Library*.

[3.](#) "Dejection: An Ode" was written on April 4, 1802. The idea Borges is referring to is found in section VI of "Dejection: An Ode," which reads as follows: "There was a time when, though my path was rough, / This joy within me dallied with distress, / And all misfortunes were but as the stuff / Whence Fancy made me dreams of happiness: / For hope grew round me, like the twining vine, / And fruits, and foliage, not my own, seemed mine. / But now afflictions bow me down to earth: / Nor care I that they rob me of my mirth; / But oh! each visitation / Suspends what Nature gave me at my birth, / My shaping spirit of Imagination. / For not to think of what I needs must feel, / But to be still and patient, all I can; / And haply by abstruse research to steal / From my own nature all the natural man— / This was my sole resource, my only plan: / Till that which suits a part infects the whole, / And now is almost grown the habit of my soul."

[4.](#) There is no book about Coleridge with this title; the book Borges is remembering is undoubtedly George Wilson Knight, *The Starlit Dome* (London: Oxford University Press, 1941). *The Starlit Dome* includes a chapter titled "Coleridge's Divine Comedy," in which the author asserts that *Christabel*, *The Ancient Mariner*, and *Kubla Khan* can be seen together as a Divine Comedy, exploring successively hell, purgatory, and heaven.

[5.](#) Jacopo Alighieri (c. 1291–1348)

[6.](#) Cangrande della Scala (1291–1329), Italian nobleman, known as the leading patron of Dante Alighieri.

7. "The Turn of the Screw" appeared in *Collier's Weekly* in 1898 and for the first time in a book in *The Two Magics*, published the same year.
8. The two versions of this poem appear on facing pages in *Coleridge, Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Stephen Potter (London: Nonesuch Press and New York: Random House, 1962).
9. The second version of the poem begins as follows:
"It is an ancient Mariner, / And he stoppeth one of three. / 'By thy long grey beard and glittering eye, / Now wherefore stopp'st thou me? / The Bridegroom's doors are opened wide, / And I am next of kin; / The guests are met, the feast is set: / May'st hear the merry din.' / He holds him with his skinny hand, / 'There was a ship,' quoth he. / 'Hold off! unhand me, grey-beard loon!' / Eftsoons his hand dropt he."
10. Borges quotes from the fourth stanza: "He holds him with his glittering eye— / The Wedding-Guest stood still, / And listens like a three years' child: / The Mariner hath his will."
11. *Arbaleses* does not appear in any of the large dictionaries of the Spanish language, however its etymology corresponds to the French *arabletes*, the Latin *arcus*, "arc," and *ballista*, "crossbow."
12. Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Pardoner's Tale" from *The Canterbury Tales*, lines 265– 68: "Ne deeth, alas! ne wol nat han my lyf / Thus walke I, lyk a restelee kaityf, / And on the ground, which is my moodres gate, / I knokke with my staf, bothe erly and late."
13. *The Flying Dutchman*, an opera in three acts, words and music by Richard Wagner, debuted in 1843.
14. John Livingston Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Way of the Imagination* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1927).
15. Samuel Purchas (1575–1626), English writer and priest. The book was *Purchas, his Pilgrimage*, published in 1625.

CLASS 15

1. Borges included *Poesía completa*, Pablo Mañé Garzón's translation of Blake, as volume 62 in his *Biblioteca personal*. In the prologue, Borges offers a brief biography of the English poet.
2. Denis Saurat, (Paris: La Colombe, 1954).
3. For example, in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (ca. 1790).
4. The poems included in *Songs of Experience* were written between 1789 and 1794. The poem "The Tyger," which Borges continually refers to, was then corrected twice by Blake and published separately.
5. See Class 9, note 10.
6. Saint Irenaeus (ca.130-202), bishop of Lyon. In his *Adversus haereses*, he describes Gnostic ideas in detail in order to refute them.
7. He is quoting from the poem "Sonnet (Suggested by some of the Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research)," written in 1913 and included in the book *The South Seas*. The text is as follows:

Not with vain tears, when we're beyond the sun,
We'll beat on the substantial doors, nor tread
Those dusty high-roads of the aimless dead
Plaintive for Earth; but rather turn and run
Down some close-covered by-way of the air,
Some low sweet alley between wind and wind,
Stoop under faint gleams, thread the shadows, find
Some whispering ghost-forgotten nook, and there

Spend in pure converse our eternal day;
Think each in each, immediately wise;
Learn all we lacked before; hear, know, and say
What this tumultuous body now denies;
And feel, who have laid our groping hands away;

And see, no longer blinded by our eyes.

[8.](#) The quote, from Blake, is, “If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, Infinite.” Huxley’s book, mentioned here by Borges, is *The Doors of Perception* (New York: Harper, 1954). A review of this book, written by Alicia Jurado, was published in the first number of the magazine *La Biblioteca* (Jan–March, 1957), edited by Borges in his position as director of the National Library.

[9.](#) The last poem of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) published in collaboration with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey”:

“For I have learned
To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
The still sad music of humanity,
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue.—And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.”

[10.](#) From *A Vision of the Last Judgement*.

[11.](#) Sixth proverb from “Proverbs of Hell” in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.

[12.](#) Among Blake’s “prophetic books” are: *America, A Prophecy* (1793), *Europe, A Prophecy* (1794), *The Book of Urizen* (1794), *The Book of Ahania* (1795), *The Book of Los* (1795), and *The Song of Los* (1795).

[13.](#) The text is “But silken nets and traps of adamant
will Oothoon spread, / And catch for thee girls of mild

silver, or of furious gold.” (“Visions of the Daughters of Albion,” lines 197–98, 1793).

- [14.](#) He is certainly referring to Samuel Foster Damon, *A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake* (Provincetown: Brown University Press, 1965), published the year before these classes were given.

CLASS 16

- [1.](#) Francisco Gómez de Quevedo y Santibáñez Villegas (1580–1645) was a Spanish nobleman, politician, and writer of the Baroque era.
- [2.](#) Léon Bloy (1846–1917). Borges includes his *Le Salut par les Juifs* [Salvation through the Jews], 1892, in volume 54 of his *Biblioteca personal*.
- [3.](#) *Arbeiten und nicht verzweifeln: Auszüge aus seinen Werken*, translated into German by Maria Kühn and A. Kretzschmar.
- [4.](#) Carlyle contributed sixteen articles to *Edinburgh Encyclopaedia* from 1820 to 1825.
- [5.](#) *Life of Schiller* was first published in *London Magazine* (1823–24).
- [6.](#) Johann Paul Friedrich Richter (1763–1825), novelist and humorist born in Wunsiedel, Germany.
- [7.](#) Published in 1824 and 1827, respectively.
- [8.](#) *Sartor Resartus* was published in 1833–34.
- [9.](#) Giuseppe Balsamo, alias Count Cagliostro (1743–95), an Italian adventurer.
- [10.](#) José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia (1766–1840), Paraguayan dictator.
- [11.](#) Published in 1845.
- [12.](#) Published in 1837.
- [13.](#) Borges is referring to *A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive* (1843).

- [14.](#) Facundo Quiroga (1788–1835) was an Argentine *candillo*. Domingo Sarmiento (1811–1888), the seventh president of Argentina, activist, and writer. He wrote *Facundo, Civilization and Barbarism* in 1845.
- [15.](#) Carlyle published her letters and papers in 1883 under the title *Letters and Memorials of Jane Welsh Carlyle*. In 1903, *New Letters and Memorials* appeared in London.
- [16.](#) Published in 1858.
- [17.](#) *The Early Kings of Norway* (1875). See also Class 1, note 3, and Class 4, note 4.
- [18.](#) In German, *Weissnichtwo* literally means “know not where.”
- [19.](#) Pedro Bonifacio Palacios, also known as Almafuerte (1854–1917), Argentine poet.
- [20.](#) Miguel de Unamuno, see Class 10, note 14.
- [21.](#) Published in 1841.
- [22.](#) “Shooting Niagara: And After?” (1867).
- [23.](#) John A. Carlyle (1801–79) was a medical doctor.
- [24.](#) Pedro Bonifacio Palacios (1854–1917), better known as Almafuerte, was an Argentine poet.
- [25.](#) *Sartor Resartus*, chapter VII: “‘The simplest costume,’ observes our Professor, ‘which I anywhere find alluded to in History, is that used as regimental, by Bolivar’s Cavalry, in the late Colombian wars. A square Blanket, twelve feet in diagonal, is provided (some were wont to cut off the corners, and make it circular): in the centre a slit is effected eighteen inches long; through this the mother-naked Trooper introduces his head and neck; and so rides shielded from all weather, and in battle from many strokes (for he rolls it about his left arm); and not only dressed, but harnessed and draperied.’”

CLASS 17

1. Sir Richard Francis Burton (1827-90), English explorer, linguist, soldier, writer, and diplomat. He studied at Oxford, from which he was expelled for a minor offense. At twenty-one he joined the East India Company. He was posted in Sindh, where he lived for eight years. Burton knew Italian, French, Greek, and Latin; during his time in Sindh he learned to speak many local languages. Eventually, Burton mastered more than twenty-five languages; forty, counting dialects. He returned to England in 1850, where he organized a series of expeditions: he visited the sacred city of Mecca, infiltrated the forbidden city of Harar, and participated in two expeditions to discover the source of the Nile. In 1860 he traveled to the United States, where he observed the life of the Mormons. He then entered the Foreign Office, and was posted to the island of Fernando Po, near the coast of Africa, and then Brazil, where he translated the works of Camoens. In 1872, he was sent to Trieste. Burton wrote and translated many texts, among them erotic texts, such as *The Perfumed Garden*, *Ananda Ranga*, and *The Kama Sutra of Vatsayana*.

The Perfumed Garden is a translation into English of the Arabic *Rawd al-atir fi nuzhat al-khatir*, written by Sheik Umar Ibn Muhammad al-Nafzawi. Burton based his translation on the French edition. Burton's version was published in 1886, under the title *The Perfumed Garden of the Cheikh Nefzaoui: A Manual of Arabian Erotology*.

2. It would be interesting to trace the relationship between this emphatic assertion and Borges's own work.

3. Published in 1836.

4. He is referring here to many influences, but mostly to Cervantes's *Exemplary Novels*.

- [5.](#) Miguel de Unamuno, see Class 10, note 14.
- [6.](#) Paul Groussac, see Class 8, note 3.
- [7.](#) Written between 1843 and 1844.
- [8.](#) 1868 and 1860, respectively. Borges included *The Moonstone* in volume 23 of *El Séptimo Círculo* of Emecé Editores, and in volumes 6 and 7 of his *Biblioteca personal*.
- [9.](#) Andrew Lang (1812-44) Scottish critic, essayist, historian, and poet. He studied the folklore and traditions of many peoples, which he adapted in his *Fairy Books* series for children. His vast work also includes books of poetry, a history of Scotland in four volumes, and direct prose translations from Greek of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.
- [10.](#) This was published in Spanish by Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares in 1951 as volume 78 of *El Séptimo Círculo* collection by Emecé Editores, in a translation by Dora de Alvear and a prologue by G. K. Chesterton, which Borges quotes at the end of this class.
- [11.](#) In another paragraph of his study *Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens*, Chesterton says, "But Dickens, having had far too little plot in his stories previously, had far too much plot in the story he never told. Dickens dies in the act of telling, not his tenth novel, but his first news of murder. He drops down dead as he is in the act of denouncing the assassin. It is permitted to Dickens, in short, to come to a literary end as strange as his literary beginning. He began by completing the old romance of travel. He ended by inventing the new detective story.... Edwin Drood may or may not have really died; but surely Dickens did not really die. Surely our real detective liveth and shall appear in the latter days of the earth. For a finished tale may give a man immortality in the light and literary

sense; but an unfinished tale suggests another immortality, more essential and more strange.”

CLASS 18

1. Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806–61). In addition to being considered an excellent poet, she was a scholar and translator of Greek, and took strong positions against slavery, for the Italian nationalist cause, and about the situation of women in the Victorian society of her era. Oscar Wilde, in his article “The Tomb of Keats” (originally published in *Irish Monthly* magazine in July 1877) includes Elizabeth Barrett with the likes of Edmund Spenser, Shakespeare, Lord Byron, Percy Shelley, and even John Keats, as the “grand court of the sweet singers of England.” He does not include Robert Browning in this list.
2. The work of Elizabeth Barrett that so impressed Browning was actually the book *Poems*, published in 1844. Browning wrote to Elizabeth saying: “I love your verses with all my heart, dear Miss Barrett ... and I love you too.” After a long courtship, Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett were secretly married on September 12, 1846, and ran off to Italy. Her *Sonnets from the Portuguese* reflect her feelings for Browning during the first years of their relationship. Elizabeth began writing those poems in 1845, but did not show them to anybody—not even Browning—until 1848. They were not published until 1850, in a new edition of *Poems*. In spite of the title, which attempts to hide the personal origin of these poem, these are not, in fact, translations from Portuguese, but rather original works by Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

3. Robert Browning and Elizabeth, in fact, had a son, Robert Wiedemann "Pen" Barrett Browning, born on March 9, 1849, in Florence. After Elizabeth's death in 1861, Pen Browning returned with his father to England. In 1887, when he was thirty-eight years old, Pen married Fannie Coddington, but his marriage did not last and they separated three years later. He died in Asolo, Italy, in 1912.
4. Oscar Wilde says of George Meredith in the dialogue, "The Decay of Lying," "Ah! Meredith! Who can define him? His style is chaos illumined by flashes of lightning. As a writer he has mastered everything except language: as a novelist he can do everything, except tell a story: as an artist he is everything except articulate."
5. In his article, "Puppets and Actors," which appeared in *The Daily Telegraph* on February 20, 1892, Oscar Wilde describes Robert Browning's works as "of introspective method and strange or sterile psychology."
6. Ramón María del Valle Inclán (1866–1936), Spanish poet and writer.
7. See Class 6, note 10.
8. "My Last Duchess, Ferrara," from *Dramatic Romances* (1845).
9. In *Men and Women* (1855).
10. "So we'll live, / And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh / At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues / Talk of court news, and we'll talk with them too— / Who loses and who wins, who's in, who's out— / And take upon's the mystery of things / As if we were God's spies..." *King Lear*, act V, scene III.
11. The poem reads: "Well, I could never write a verse, —could you? / Let's to the Prado and make the most of time."
12. "An Epistle Containing the Strange Medical Experience of Karshish, the Arab Physician" in *Men*

and Women (1855).

- [13.](#) This poem is called “Cleon,” and is also in the book *Men and Women*.

CLASS 19

- [1.](#) Originally published in *Dramatic Romances* (1845).
- [2.](#) King Lear, act III, scene IV. The words are spoken by Edgar, Gloucester’s eldest son: “Childe Roland to the dark tower came, / His word was still ‘Fie, foh, and fum, / I smell the blood of a British man.’”
- [3.](#) This poem appears in the book *Cornhuskers* (1918).
- [4.](#) Actually, a six-year-old girl.
- [5.](#) Originally published in *Dramatis Personae* (1864).
- [6.](#) Originally published in *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842).
- [7.](#) The full text of the poem “Memorabilia”: “Ah, did you once see Shelley plain, / And did he stop and speak to you? / And did you speak to him again? / How strange it seems, and new! // But you were living before that, / And you are living after, / And the memory I started at— / My starting moves your laughter! // I crossed a moor, with a name of its own / And a certain use in the world no doubt, / Yet a hand’s-breadth of it shines alone / ‘Mid the blank miles round about: // For there I picked up on the heather / And there I put inside my breast / A moulted feather, an eagle-feather— / Well, I forget the rest.”
- [8.](#) Alfonso Reyes (1889–1959), Mexican writer, philosopher, and diplomat.
- [9.](#) Manuel José Othón (1858–1906), Mexican poet born in San Luis de Potosí. His poetry is characterized by a profound and vivid perception of nature. Among his works: *Poemas* (1880), *Poemas rústicos* (1902), *En el desierto*, *Idilio salvaje* (1906). He wrote stories, short novels, and plays.

- [10.](#) The poem is “Confessions” from *Dramatis Personae* (1864). The first stanza says, “What is he buzzing in my ears? / ‘Now that I come to die, / Do I view the world as a vale of tears?’ / Ah, reverend sir, not I!”
- [11.](#) The fifth stanza of the poem is “At a terrace, somewhere near the stopper, / There watched for me, one June, / A girl: I know, sir, it’s improper, / My poor mind’s out of tune.”
- [12.](#) The poem is “Caliban upon Setebos; or Natural Theology in the Island,” also from *Dramatis Personae*.
- [13.](#) From *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842).
- [14.](#) *Rashomon*, which premiered in 1950, was directed by Akira Kurosawa and starred Toshiro Mifune as a bandit, and Machiko Kyo in the woman’s role. It received the Golden Lion prize at the Venice Film Festival in 1951 and made Kurosawa into a world-renowned artist.
- [15.](#) Akutagawa Ryunosuke (1892–1927), Japanese writer. His stories, novels, and essays—inspired by historical traditions and legends of ancient Japan—demonstrate an unusual capacity for reinterpretation and the incorporation of perspectives and techniques from Western literature. Two of his works, *Rashomon*, of 1915, and *Yabu no naka*, of 1921, were the inspiration for the film *Rashomon* by Akira Kurosawa.
- [16.](#) Volume 503 of Everyman’s Library, with an introduction by Charles E. Hodell (1917).
- [17.](#) Another movie that uses this same mechanism in an ingenious way is *The Killing* (1956), directed by Stanley Kubrick.
- [18.](#) In English, *Elective Affinities*, published in 1809.
- [19.](#) In his essay “Kafka and his Precursors.”
- [20.](#) From *Dramatis Personae* (1864).
- [21.](#) Abraham ben Meir ibn Ezra (1092–1167), Spanish rabbi, philosopher, and poet born in Toledo. His great erudition covered medicine, linguistics, and astronomy; his Biblical exegeses represented an

important contribution to the Golden Age of Spanish Jewry. He was also knowledgeable in astrology and numerology. He was called "*el Sabio*" "the Wise," as well as "The Great," and "The Admirable Doctor." He traveled around Europe and the Middle East. He visited London, Rome, Narbonne, Mantua, and Verona, as well as Egypt and Palestine.

[22.](#) The first stanza of the poem: "Grow old along with me! / The best is yet to be, / The last of life, for which the first was made: / Our times are in His hand / Who saith 'A whole I planned, / Youth shows but half; trust God: see all, nor be afraid!'"

[23.](#) Borges is referring to *Browning Cyclopaedia* by Edward Berdoo, first published in 1891 in London by Swan, Sonnenschein and Co.

[24.](#) In an article about the poem "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came," Berdoo asserts that this constitutes a true plea against the cruelty of science, which forces students to torture its animal victims, the only goal being to achieve the "dark tower of Knowledge, which to them has neither door nor window." According to Berdoo, when Browning wrote this poem, he could not have created "a more faithful picture of the spiritual ruin and desolation which await the student of medicine who sets forth on the fatal course of an experimental torturer." Berdoo goes on to say, "I have good authority for saying that had Mr. Browning seen this interpretation of his poem, he would have cordially accepted it as at least one legitimate explanation." (104-05). Browning himself always refused to explain the meaning of those lines, merely affirming that the poem was inspired by a dream.

[25.](#) G. K. Chesterton, Robert Browning, in the *English Men of letters* (London: Macmillan & Co, 1911).

[26.](#) Maisie Ward, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton* (Sheed & Ward: New York, 1943).

[27.](#) “On my advice the Macmillans had asked him to do Browning in the ‘English Men of Letters,’ when he was still not quite arrived. Old Mr. Craik, the Senior Partner, sent for me and I found him in white fury, with Chesterton’s proofs corrected in pencil; or rather not corrected; there were still thirteen errors uncorrected on one page; mostly in quotations from Browning. A selection from a Scotch ballad had been quoted from memory and three of the four lines were wrong. I wrote to Chesterton saying that the firm thought the book was going to ‘disgrace’ them. His reply was like the trumpeting of a crushed elephant. But the book was a huge success.” Stephen Gwynn quoted by Cyril Stevens in Ward, *Chesterton*, 145.

CLASS 20

- [1.](#) Gabriele Giuseppe Rossetti (1783–1854), Italian poet and scholar.
- [2.](#) Gabriele Giuseppe Rossetti’s edition of *The Divine Comedy* was published in two volumes, in 1826 and 1827 respectively.
- [3.](#) See Class 14, note 6.
- [4.](#) See Class 14, note 5.
- [5.](#) Rossetti’s mother, Frances Mary Lavinia Polidori, was the sister of Dr. John William Polidori (1795–1821), who was Lord Byron’s doctor when he first went into exile in 1816. At the end of the summer of that year, Byron and Polidori became enemies. Three years later, in 1819, there appeared in *New Monthly* magazine a story titled “The Vampyre.” This story was at first attributed to Lord Byron, but the following month Polidori wrote a letter to the magazine in which he confessed his own authorship and asserted that he wrote it based on another story originally

written by Lord Byron. Byron, enraged, denied any relationship to the story, asserting, "I have a personal dislike to Vampires, and the little acquaintance I have with them would by no means induce me to reveal their secrets." Many critics have pointed out that the main character in the story, the vampire Lord Ruthven, seems to be inspired by Lord Byron himself, and may be the result of Polidori's antipathy to the person who had been his friend and patient.

[6.](#) William Holman Hunt (1827-1910), British painter.

Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones (1833-98), painter and designer born in Birmingham, England.

[7.](#) Borges uses the term "*Rey Artús*" in Spanish, a variant of the name of King Arthur.

[8.](#) *La morte d'Arthur*, whose original title was *The Book of King Arthur and His Knights of the Round Table*, was written by Sir Thomas Malory between 1469 and 1470, and published by William Caxton in 1485.

[9.](#) *Lunfardo* is the dialect originating in the late nineteenth century and spoken by the lower classes of Buenos Aires.

[10.](#) Rossetti wrote a poem about insomnia titled "Insomnia." The line Borges quotes belongs to the last line of a poem called "A Superscription."

[11.](#) Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal (1829-62). Rossetti met Elizabeth in 1850, but they did not marry until 1860. Elizabeth was a model for many of Rossetti's paintings and for many other pre-Raphaelite painters.

[12.](#) Chloral is the oldest sleeping draught known to man. Because of its unpleasant taste it was often diluted in orange juice or with ginger. All other sources we consulted agree that the substance taken by Elizabeth Siddal was not chloral but laudanum, a pharmaceutical substance derived from opium.

[13.](#) There is a famous poem by Heinrich Heine, "Der Doppelgänger," put to music by Franz Schubert in

1828 as part of the posthumous *Lieder, Schwanengesang* D.957.

[14.](#) Borges mentions the “fetch” in his analysis of the “double” in his *Book of Imaginary Beings*, OCC, 616.

[15.](#) A long poem found in Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Ballads* (1890). Borges does not mention this poem again in any of the classes he dedicates to Stevenson.

[16.](#) Rossetti’s *Poems and Translations*, with an introduction by E. G. Gardner, volume 626 of Everyman’s Library.

[17.](#) The title of the poem is not “I Have Been Here Before,” but “Sudden Light.” Borges is quoting the first line.

[18.](#) Buchanan’s article appeared in *The Contemporary Review* in October 1871.

[19.](#) The text of the sonnet is as follows:

“At length their long kiss severed, with sweet smart:
And as the last slow sudden drops are shed
From sparkling eaves when all the storm has fled,
So singly flagged the pulses of each heart.
Their bosoms sundered, with the opening start
Of married flowers to either side outspread
From the knit stem; yet still their mouths, burnt red,
Fawned on each other where they lay apart.

Sleep sank them lower than the tide of dreams,
And their dreams watched them sink, and slid away.
Slowly their souls swam up again, through gleams Of
watered light and dull drowned waifs of day;
Till from some wonder of new woods and streams
He woke, and wondered more: for there she lay.”

[20.](#) The poem is titled “Inclusiveness” and reads slightly differently than Borges quotes:

"The changing guests, each in a different mood,
Sit at the roadside table and arise:
And every life among them in likewise
Is a soul's board set daily with new food.
What man has bent o'er his son's sleep, to brood
How that face shall watch his when cold it lies?—
Or thought, as his own mother kissed his eyes,
Of what her kiss was when his father wooed?

May not this ancient room thou sitt'st in dwell
In separate living souls for joy or pain?
Nay, all its corners may be painted plain
Where Heaven shows pictures of some life spent well,
And may be stamped, a memory all in vain,
Upon the sight of lidless eyes in Hell."

[21.](#) John Boynton Priestley (1894–1984). The works Borges mentions are *I Have Been Here Before* (1937), *Time and the Conways* (1937), and *An Inspector Calls* (1946).

[22.](#) The title is "Sudden Light."

CLASS 21

[1.](#) Borges recounts this legend in detail in his *Book of Imaginary Beings*, OCC, 599.

[2.](#) Max Simon Nordau, Hungarian writer and doctor of Jewish origin, born in Pest, Hungary, in 1849 and died in Paris in 1923. His most famous work is *Die Konventionellen Lügen der Kulturmenschheit*, [*The Conventional Lies of our Civilization*] (1883).

The German title of *Degeneration* is *Entartung*.

[3.](#) From here, a student reads the poem and Borges comments on it stanza by stanza. The readings in English were omitted from the original transcript, but

have been reinserted here to allow for a better appreciation of Borges's comments and translations.

4. Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, canto II, stanza LIII: "A solitary shriek, the bubbling cry / Of some strong swimmer in his agony."
5. Miguel de Unamuno (1864–1936), Spanish essayist, novelist, playwright, and philosopher.
6. "Troy Town" was written in 1869.
7. See Class 10, note 8. "The Unobtainable Cup" [*La copa inhallable*] is a long eclogue from Leopoldo Lugones's book, *Lunario sentimental* (1909).
8. Borges refers to these two words in his essay "Blindness" [*La Ceguera*] in *Seven Nights* [*Siete Noches*], OCC Vol III, 280.
9. Andrew Lang (1844–1912) was a Scottish poet, critic, and contributor to the field of anthropology.

CLASS 22

1. In 1856. The full name of this student publication is *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*.
2. See Class 21, note 9.
3. Published in 1858.
4. Jean Bodel (ca.1167–1210), epic poet, playwright, and author of French *fabliaux*. The work Borges refers to and later quotes is *La Chanson des Saisnes* [Song of the Saxons], written by Bodel around the year 1200.

Charlemagne was defeated by the Basques on August 15, 778, in Roncesvalles, a mountain pass in the western Pyrenees (between France and the Spanish province of Navarre). It has been idealized by many poets as an example of glorious military martyrdom.

- [5.](#) Joseph of Arimathea, according to the Gospels, is the man who donated his own tomb for the burial of Jesus.
- [6.](#) According to the source of the legend, the name can also appear as Galaor or Galehaut.
- [7.](#) Avalon is a mythological country ruled by Morgan, the sister of King Arthur. According to the legend, Arthur is taken there after his last battle. In spite of the efforts of several researchers, the historical existence of Arthur has never been proven.
- [8.](#) He is referring to Olaf II Haraldsson (995-1030), king of Norway from 1015 to his death. He spent his reign uniting Norway and converting his people to Christianity. His death in the Battle of Stiklestad, in the year 1030, turned him into a saint and the eternal king of Norway, and contributed to the consolidation of the monarchy as well as the establishment of the church in that country.
- [9.](#) The battle took place on the outskirts of the city of Alcácer Quibir, in Morocco in August 1578. There the king of Portugal, Don Sebastian (1554-78), and in spite of the opposition of his people, assisted Mohamed the Black, deposed king of Morocco. In spite of having an army of 13,000 Portuguese, 1,000 Spanish, 3,000 Germans, and 600 Italians, he was unable to overcome the forces of Abd-al Malik, "El Moluco," who commanded the insurrection. Because of a series of calamities, only sixty soldiers of Don Sebastian escaped with their lives. Sebastian himself died from battle wounds, though there was a legend about his mysterious disappearance, and the hope that he could return at any moment to save his country.
- [10.](#) Antônio Conselheiro (1830-97) was a peasant from the northeast of Brazil who led a group of about two hundred people in a failed rebellion against the government. Apparently Conselheiro believed he was

of divine lineage and proposed the reinstatement of the monarchy in Brazil. He confronted the army, in which fought the poet Euclides da Cunha (1866–1909). Euclides da Cunha was at first against the revolutionaries, but he soon understood that the rebellion was the result of poverty, and he felt compassion for their fate. He wrote about his experiences in his work *Rebellion in the Backlands*. With difficulty, the army managed to defeat the peasants of Conselheiro in the battle of Canudos. Conselheiro and his companions who survived the battle were beheaded by the government forces and their heads were hung from posts.

11. Seventh verse of the *Chanson des Saisnes* by Jean Bodel. Following are the first lines of the poem: “*Qui d’oyr et d’entendre a loisir ne talant / Face pais, si escoute bonne chançon vaillant / Dont li livre d’estoire sont tesmoing et garant! / Jamais vilains jouglers de cesti ne se vant, / Car il n’en saroit dire ne les vers ne le chant. / N’en sont que trois materes a nul home vivant: / De France et de Bretaigne et de Romme la grant; / Ne de ces trois materes n’i a nule samblant. / Le conte de Bretaigne si sont vain et plaisant, / Et cil de Romme sage et de sens aprendant, / Cil de France sont voir chascun jour aparant. / Et de ces trois materes tieng la plus voir disant: / La coronne de France doit estre si avant / Que tout autre roi doivent estre a li apendant / De la loi crestienne, qui en Dieu sont creant.*”

12. See Class 7.

13. John Lockwood Kipling (1837–1911). He wrote a book called *Beast and Man in India*.

14. Quintus Fabius Maximus (ca. 280–203 BC), Roman general and statesman, confronted Hannibal during the Second Punic War (218–201 BC). His strategy consisted of keeping the enemy busy while avoiding large confrontations.

The Montoneros was an Argentine leftist guerilla group active during the nineteen sixties and seventies.

[15.](#) Borges is referring here to the tactics used by Hugh O'Neill (1550–1616), who between 1595 and 1603 led a revolt against the English control of Ireland.

[16.](#) Morris founded his first decorating firm, Morris & Company, decorator, in 1859. Two years later he expanded the project with the creation of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co., which in 1875 became Morris & Co.

[17.](#) Kelmscott Press was founded at the end of 1890. The first book Morris published was his own book, *Story of the Glittering Plain*, 1891.

[18.](#) This collection was published in London by Bernard Quaritch between 1891 and 1905. It includes the following volumes: Vol. 1: *The Story of Howard the Halt. The Story of the Banded Men. The Story of Hen Thorir*; Vol. 2: *The Story of the Ere-dwellers (Eyrbyggja saga)*, with *The Story of the Heath-Slayings (Heidarviga saga)*, as appendix; Vols. 3 to 6: *The Stories of the Kings of Norway called the Round world (Heimskringla)*, by Snorri Sturluson.

[19.](#) Borges is referring to the book titled *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, designed by Morris and illustrated by Burne-Jones, published in 1896. This book, considered a masterpiece for the exquisite harmony of its design, typography, and illustrations, represents the culmination of Morris's work at the head of Kelmscott Press.

[20.](#) The lines Borges is remembering come from the epilogue of *The Earthly Paradise*, where Morris says goodbye to his book: "Here are we for the last time face to face / Thou and I, Book." Morris warns his book that it might encounter Chaucer in its travels: "Well, think of him, I bid thee, on the road / And if it hap that midst of thy defeat / Fainting beneath thy follies' heavy load, / My Master, Geoffrey Chaucer,

thou do meet, Then shalt thou win a space of rest full sweet / Then be thou bold, and speak the words I say, / The idle singer of an empty day!"

[21.](#) Adolfo Morpurgo (1889–1972), Argentine musician, born in Trieste, Italy. He was a violinist and the director of an orchestra. He studied cello in Budapest with David Popper and then toured Italy, Austria, and France. He settled in Argentina in 1913, where he played with many orchestras and chamber groups and also directed opera and ballet. He shared the stage with Macagni, Respighi, Wanda Landowska, Honegger, and Villa-Lobos, among other. He organized productions of operas and ancient cantatas. He was professor of the *Conservatorio Nacional de Música*, the *Conservatorio Municipal de Buenos Aires*, and the Universidad de La Plata. In 1937 he founded the *Agrupación Argentina de Instrumentos Antiguos*, which he conducted as a musician on the viola da gamba, and the viola del perdón. (This instrument was made in Paris at the end of the sixteenth century, and according to the legend, its creator was a prisoner condemned to death who was pardoned for inventing it. It has twenty-six chords: seven real and nineteen that vibrate sympathetically, producing a peculiar sound effect). Morpurgo owned an exceptional collection of two thousand ancient instruments, which he bought during his travels, given to him by embassies, or obtained under interesting circumstances. One example is an old oboe that Morpurgo found in an antique store in Buenos Aires, listed in the catalogue as a "candelabra." Morpurgo is mentioned in *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, edited by Eric Blom.

[22.](#) Morris made this trip in 1871.

[23.](#) Grettir is the central character of *Grettir's Saga*. This saga, by an anonymous author, has been dated

to around 1300 and is the latest of the Sagas of Icelanders. Grettir was an historical character; the saga that carries his name combines many real events with fiction. Borges transcribes several paragraphs of this saga and comments on them in *Medieval Germanic Literature*, OCC, 934 and 938.

[24.](#) Morris's translation of *Beowulf* was first published in 1895.

[25.](#) *Story of Sigurd the Volsung* and *The Fall of the Niblungs* (1876).

Borges analyzes the *Völsunga Saga* in *Medieval Germanic Literature*, OCC, 966-70.

[26.](#) He could be referring here to *The Wood Beyond the World* (1894) or *The Well at the World's End* (1896).

[27.](#) The title is *A Dream of John Ball*. It was published in *The Commonwealth* between November 1886 and January 1887, and for the first time as a book in April 1888.

[28.](#) John Ball was an English priest who from an early age preached against the nobles, the clergy, and the pope, arguing that all men are equal. In 1381, he joined the uprising in Kent, where a group of serfs and farmers led by Wat Tyler violently rebelled against the establishment. Ball gave sermons and urged on the rebels, using a well-known popular ditty: "When Adam delved and Eve span, / Who was then the Gentleman?" After the death of Tyler, Ball took over the leadership of the rebellion, which was finally subdued. Defeated, Ball surrendered to Richard II. He was condemned to death and in the same year, 1381, was hung and quartered in Saint Albans.

[29.](#) Published in 1890.

[30.](#) Shortly before Morris died in 1896, at sixty-two-years old, one of his doctors came up with the following diagnosis: he asserted that the writer suffered from the affliction of "simply being *William*

Morris, and having done more work than most *ten men*."

[31.](#) Morris's close friends called him this because his unruly hair reminded them of the character Topsy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, by Harriet Beecher Stowe.

[32.](#) He wrote *The Earthly Paradise* in 1868 or 1869.

[33.](#) Here and for the rest of the class, Borges is discussing the long poem "The Defence of Guenevere," the first of the pieces in the book of the same title, published in 1858. As in the previous classes, the reading of the poem in English, removed from the original transcription, has been put back here to give the context for Borges's comments and in order to better evoke the general atmosphere of the class.

CLASS 23

[1.](#) This poem is the nineteenth in the book.

[2.](#) The fifteenth poem in *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*.

[3.](#) He is talking about the first section of the Anglo-Saxon poem, "The Phoenix," which contains a description of *neorxnawang* or "earthly paradise." Borges briefly describes this poem in Class 7.

[4.](#) "... the world is wide / For you I say,—for me a narrow space / Betwixt the four walls of a fighting place." *The Earthly Paradise*, "Prologue: The Wanderers."

[5.](#) "Farewell, it yet may hap that I a king / Shall be remembered but by this one thing, / That on the morn before ye crossed the sea / Ye gave and took in common talk with me; / But with this ring keep memory of the morn, / O Breton, and thou North-

man, by this horn / Remember me, who am of Odin's blood ..."

[6.](#) Borges is referring here to the already mentioned Varangian Guard. See Class 4, note 9.

[7.](#) "Of heaven or Hell I have no power to sing, / I cannot ease the burden of your fears, / Or make quick-coming death a little thing, / Or bring again the pleasure of past years, / Nor for my words shall ye forget your tears, / Or hope again for aught that I can say, / The idle singer of an empty day." *The Earthly Paradise*, "An Apology."

[8.](#) "Oh Master, O thou great of heart and tongue,
Thou well mayst ask me why I wander here,
In raiment rent of stories oft besung!
But of thy gentleness draw thou anear,
And then the heart of one who held thee dear
Mayst thou behold! So near as that I lay
Unto the singer of an empty day."

[9.](#) Borges translates these lines in "A King of Fire and His Steed" [*Un rey de fuego y su caballo*] in his *Book of Imaginary Beings*, OCC, 688.

[10.](#) Published in 1867.

[11.](#) "In Thessaly, beside the tumbling sea,
Once dwelt a folk, men called the Minyæ;
For, coming from Orchomenus the old,
Bearing their wives and children, beasts and gold,
Through many a league of land they took their way,
And stopped at last, where in a sunny bay
The green Anaurus cleaves the white sea-sand,
And eastward inland doth Mount Pelion stand,
Where bears and wolves the centaurs' arrows find ..."
The Life and Death of Jason, Book 1, lines 1-10.

[12.](#) "There shall the quick-eyed centaurs be they friends."

The Life and Death of Jason, Book 1, line 87.

[13.](#) "But 'mid his noise the listening man could hear
The sound of hoofs, whereat a little fear

He felt within his heart, and heeded nought
The struggling of the child, who ever sought
To gain the horn all glittering of bright gold,
Wrought by the cunning Dædalus of old.
But louder still the noise he hearkened grew,
Until at last in sight the Centaur drew ...”

The Life and Death of Jason, lines 132-140.

[14.](#) “For to the waist was man, but all below
A mighty horse, once roan, now well-nigh white
With lapse of years; with oak-wreaths was he dight
Where man joined unto horse,”

The Life and Death of Jason, lines 145-147.

[15.](#) “So, when he saw him coming through the
trees,

The trembling slave sunk down upon his knees”

The Life and Death of Jason, lines 151-152.

[16.](#) This episode belongs to *Brennu-Njáls saga* or *Njal's Saga* (chapter 77). The woman was Hallgerd, daughter of Hauskuld.

[17.](#) The conclusion of the episode of Gunnar and Borges's commentary can be found in the first edition of *Antiguas literaturas germánicas* (1951), p. 71.

“Weave me a cord with your hair,” he tells Hallgerd.”

“Is it a question of life or death?” she asks.

“Yes,” Gunnar answers.

“Then remember that slap you gave me and I will watch you die,” Hallgerd says.

Thus Gunnar dies, overcome by many, and they also killed Samr, his dog, but first the dog killed a man. The narrator does not tell us that Hallgerd held this resentment against her husband; we suddenly find out, as things are often revealed in reality.

CLASS 24

1. The full title is *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung*.
2. Victor Hugo, *La légende des Siècles*, perhaps Hugo's most important poetic work, was published in three parts in the years 1859, 1877, and 1883. In his preface, Hugo affirmed that he wanted to express humanity in a kind of cyclical work; paint it successively and simultaneously in all its aspects—history, fable, philosophy, religion, science—all summarized as one vast movement toward the light.
3. Borges is referring here to *Piers Plowman*, attributed to William Langland, mentioned earlier.
4. In these classes, Borges uses the Spanish version of this name (Brunilda). In *Medieval Germanic Literature*, Borges refers to this character using the original form, Brynhild.
5. In the saga, Gudrun promises to marry her daughter, Svanhild—described as a woman with a sharp eye and exceptional beauty—to a powerful king named Jormunrek. Svanhild is unjustly accused of betraying Jormunrek and is condemned to die. She is trampled by horses. The final chapters of the saga tell how Gudrun plans to avenge Svanhild, and she convinces her other children to kill King Jormunrek.
Gudrun later married the King Atli (loosely based on Attila the Hun).
6. Published as a book in 1883.
7. Written in collaboration with Lloyd Osburne. Published in *Scribner's Magazine* 10–12 (August 1891–July 1892), and as a book the same year.
8. "On a New Form of Intermittent Light and Lighthouses," from the *Transactions of the Royal Scottish Society of Arts*, vol. VIII, 1870–71 (Edinburgh: Neill and Company, 1871).
9. The poem is numbered XXXVIII in the book *Underwoods*, published in 1887. It reads: "Say not of me that weakly I declined / The labours of my sires,

and fled to sea, / The towers we founded and the lamps we lit, / To play at home with paper like a child. / But rather say: In the afternoon of time / A strenuous family dusted from its hands / The sand of granite, and beholding far / Along the sounding coast its pyramids / And tall memorials catch the dying sun, / Smiled well content, and to this childish task / Around the fire addressed its evening hours."

[10.](#) Borges is quoting the last two lines of "*Dedicatoria a los antepasados (1500- 1900)*" [Dedication to My Forbearers], the first poem in Lugones's *Poemas Solariegos* [Ancestral Poems] (1927).

[11.](#) *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* was published in 1886.

[12.](#) Included in *Virginibus Puerisque and Other Papers*, 1881.

[13.](#) Published in 1882.

[14.](#) Harun al-Rashid (766-809), the fifth caliph of the Abbasid Dynasty. He is remembered as a great patron of the arts and for the luxury of his court in Baghdad. He was immortalized in the legends that make up *A Thousand and One Nights*.

[15.](#) In fact, they were at an international colony for painters in Barbizon, near Fontainebleau, France.

[16.](#) Lloyd Osbourne (1868-1947), North American writer.

[17.](#) It has thirty-nine chapters.

[18.](#) The full title is *Deacon Brodie or The Double Life* and was written in 1879. Together, Stevenson and his friend William Ernest Henley also wrote *Beau Austin* (1884), *Admiral Guinea* (1884), and *Macaire* (1885). Henley was Stevenson's agent and his inspiration for the character Long John Silver in *Treasure Island*.

[19.](#) In Samoa, Stevenson himself gave it this name, which means "five rivers." There he was buried, on a mountaintop, looking over the Pacific Ocean.

[20.](#) The letter is titled "Father Damien: An open letter to the Reverend Dr. Hyde of Honolulu," written in

Sydney on February 25, 1890. A few of the paragraphs are as follows: "You may ask on what authority I speak. It was my inclement destiny to become acquainted, not with Damien, but with Dr. Hyde. When I visited the lazaretto, Damien was already in his resting grave. But such information as I have, I gathered on the spot in conversation with those who knew him well and long: some indeed who revered his memory; but others who had sparred and wrangled with him, who beheld him with no halo, who perhaps regarded him with small respect, and through whose unprepared and scarcely partial communications the plain, human features of the man shone on me convincingly. These gave me what knowledge I possess; ... we will (if you please) go hand-in-hand through the different phrases of your letter, and candidly examine each from the point of view of its truth, its appositeness, and its charity.

Damien was *coarse*.

It is very possible. You make us sorry for the lepers, who had only a coarse old peasant for their friend and father. But you, who were so refined, why were you not there, to cheer them with the lights of culture?...

Damien was *dirty*.

He was. Think of the poor lepers annoyed with this dirty comrade! But the clean Dr. Hyde was at his food in a fine house.

Damien was *headstrong*.

I believe you are right again; and I thank God for his strong head and heart."

[21.](#) The essay was included in the book *Across the Plains: With Other Memories and Essays*, 1892.

[22.](#) The essay Borges remembers is titled, "On some technical elements of style in literature," and it is the first in Stevenson's book *Essays in the Art of Writing*.

- [23.](#) This is the first stanza of Sonnet X by Garcilaso de la Vega, a sixteenth-century Spanish soldier and poet.
- [24.](#) G. K. Chesterton, *Robert Louis Stevenson*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1927).
- [25.](#) Stephen Lucius Gwynn (1864-1950), Irish poet, writer, and critic born in Dublin. Among his principal works are *Masters of English Literature* (1904), and his studies of Tennyson, Thomas Moore, Sir Walter Scott, Horace Walpole, Mary Kingsley, Swift, and Goldsmith. His *Collected Poems* appeared in 1923. His autobiography, titled *Experiences of a Literary Man*, was published in 1926. Stevenson's biography written by Stephen Gwynn is volume X of this collection.

CLASS 25

- [1.](#) Published in 1882. This book of Stevenson's was published as volume 53 in the collection *Biblioteca personal*, translated by R. Durán, under the title *Las nuevas noches árabes*.
- [2.](#) Published in 1908.
- [3.](#) See Class 24, note 19.
- [4.](#) Published first in *The Broken Shaft: Tales of Mid-Ocean*, in Unwin's Christmas Annual, ed. Sir Henry Norman (London: Fisher-Unwin, 1885). Also included in *The Merry Men and Other Tales and Fables* (1887). It is also included in volume 53 of *Biblioteca personal*.
- [5.](#) *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* was published in 1890.
- [6.](#) *The Ebb-Tide* is by Robert Louis Stevenson and Lloyd Osbourne, 1894. Ricardo Baeza (1890-1956) was born in Cuba but lived most of his life in Spain. He was a highly esteemed journalist and translator.

- [7.](#) Borges is talking about *Weir of Hermiston*. Stevenson wrote the last sentences of it the day he died. The novel, which takes place in Scotland in the nineteenth century, was published posthumously in 1896.

EPILOGUE

- [1.](#) From *Borges para millones*, an interview held at the National Library in 1979.

AFTERWORD

- [1.](#) Fernando Sorrentino, *Siete conversaciones con Jorge Luis Borges* [*Seven Conversations with Borges*], (Editorial El Ateneo, 1996) p. 205.
- [2.](#) Borges taught English literature while his assistant, Jaime Rest, was responsible for North American literature.
- [3.](#) Jorge Luis Borges, *Autobiografía 1899-1970*, (Buenos Aires, El Ateneo, 1999).
- [4.](#) Guillermo Gasió, *Borges en Japón, Japón en Borges*, (Buenos Aires, Eudeba, 1988) p. 68.
- [5.](#) Sorrentino, *Siete conversaciones*, p. 314.

BORGES IN CLASS

- [1.](#) From “Una oración” [“One line”], in *Elogio de la Sombra* [*In Praise of Darkness*], OC II, p. 392. Borges expresses a similar thought on pages 204-205 of Enrique Pezzoni, *lector de Borges* [reader of Borges]: “One of the most gratifying moments of my life was a

few months ago, when someone I didn't know at all stopped me in the street and said, 'I want to thank you, Borges.' 'Why?' I asked him. 'Well,' he said, 'you introduced me to Robert Louis Stevenson.' I told him, 'At this moment I feel justified because of this encounter with you.' It is unusual for one to feel justified; I, most of the time, feel unjustifiable, but at that moment, no; I felt justified: I have done good deeds, I have given someone a gift of this greatness that is Stevenson; may everything else be forgotten."

[2.](#) "Borges visita a Pezzoni," Class 16. In *Enrique Pezzoni* (Buenos Aires, Sudamaericana), p. 204.

[3.](#) For the sake of rigor, it must be noted that West-Saxon, the Old English dialect—which became the literary standard of its time, and is thus the one most commonly studied—is not the direct ancestor of modern Standard English. Modern English is mostly derived from an Anglican dialect.

[4.](#) From the preface to *A Brief Anglo-Saxon Anthology*, OCC, p. 787.

[5.](#) From "*La cegura*" ["On Blindness"], *Siete Noches* [*Seven Nights*], OCC III, p. 280.

[6.](#) This may lead us to forgive Borges's inclusion of historically inaccurate horned protrusions on the Viking helmets as a moviemaking license!

[7.](#) "As we read through the pages of *Heimskringla* we feel that even if the historical characters did not really say those things, they should have, and with the same economy of words." (From Borges's prologue to his translation of the first part of Snorri Sturluson's *Younger or Prose Edda*, *The Deluding of Gylfi*.)

INDEX

A

Aeneid, the, [8](#), [23](#), [40](#), [85](#), [104](#), [140](#), [234](#)
Akutagawa Rynosuke, [173](#)
Alfred the Great (king of Wessex), [64](#)
Almafuerte, [153](#), [157](#)
American Notes, [161](#)
Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, *The*, [4](#), [30](#), [35](#), [56](#), [64](#)
Anglo-Saxons: bestiary of, [57-60](#); elegies of, [45-46](#), [48-53](#), [55](#); history of, [1-3](#), [9](#), [35](#), [41](#), [56](#); language of, [6-7](#), [13](#), [48](#), [62-64](#); literature of, [3-6](#), [36](#), [45-46](#), [48-55](#), [61-62](#); mythology of, [2](#); riddles of, [60](#)
Arabian Nights. See *A Thousand and One Nights*
Aristotle, [74](#), [103](#)
Arthur, King, [182](#), [213-14](#)
Augustine, Saint, [189](#)

B

Bacon, Francis, [57](#), [135](#), [142](#)
Baeza, Ricardo, [250](#)
Barrack-Room Ballads, [111](#)
"Battle of Brunanburh," [30-34](#), [60](#)
"Battle of Maldon, The" [35-41](#), [45](#), [60-61](#), [264-66](#)
Baudelaire, Charles, [133](#), [218](#), [243](#)
Bécquer, Gustavo Adolfo, [101](#)
Bede, Venerable, [3](#), [4](#), [41-42](#)
Beowulf: age of, [7](#); "Battle of Brunanburh" and, [32](#); bravery and boastfulness in, [16-17](#), [20-22](#); characters of, [9-10](#), [12-13](#), [16](#); language and style of,

[8-9](#), [15](#), [23](#); length of, [4](#), [8](#); nature and, [14-15](#); plot of, [9-11](#), [12-21](#); translation of, by Morris, [217](#), [234](#)
Bergson, Henri L., [97](#)
Berkeley, George, [124](#), [142](#), [152](#)
Bestiary, Anglo-Saxon, [57-60](#)
Bible, translations of, [23](#), [73](#)
Biographia Literaria, [121](#)
Blair, Hugh, [103](#), [106](#)
Blake, William: character of, [137](#); legacy of, [146-47](#); life of, [137-38](#); philosophy of, [138-45](#); Swedenborg and, [138](#), [141](#), [143-44](#); works of, [138-39](#), [145-46](#)
“Blessed Damozel, The,” [186](#), [191-202](#)
Bloy, Léon, [148](#), [153](#)
Boileau-Despréaux, Nicolas, [73-74](#), [79](#)
Bolívar, Simón, [157](#)
Book of Thel, [139](#)
Boswell, James, [72](#), [75](#), [87](#), [90-99](#), [106](#)
Brendan, Saint, [59](#)
Brooke, Rupert, [142](#)
Browne, Thomas, [84](#)
Browning, Elizabeth Barrett, [164-65](#), [166](#), [175](#)
Browning, Robert: life of, [164-66](#); obscurity of, [166](#); Rossetti and, [180](#), [183](#); works of, [165-79](#)
Buchanan, Robert, [186](#), [187](#)
Buddha, legend of, [79-80](#)
Burne-Jones, Edward Coley, [182](#), [212](#)
Burton, Richard, [158](#)
Byron, Lord, [100-101](#), [115](#), [149](#), [194](#)

C

Caedmon, [41-42](#), [123](#)
“Caliban upon Setebos,” [173](#)
Candide, [76](#), [84](#), [86](#), [140](#)
Canterbury Tales, *The*, [229](#)
Capote, Truman, [124-25](#)
Carlyle, John A., [156](#)

Carlyle, Thomas: Coleridge and, [127](#); Johnson and, [73](#), [88-89](#), [154](#); languages and, [123](#), [149](#), [150](#); life of, [148-51](#), [156-57](#); philosophy of, [152-56](#); Shakespeare and, [230](#); works of, [149-53](#), [156-57](#)
Cervantes, Miguel de, [95](#), [149](#), [160](#), [168](#)
Cesarotti, Melchiorre, [105](#)
Chanson de Roland, [35](#), [39](#), [40](#), [68](#)
Chaucer, Geoffrey, [70](#), [71](#), [133](#), [137](#), [216](#), [229-31](#), [233](#)
Chesterton, G. K., [51](#), [108](#), [116](#), [158](#), [163](#), [176](#), [177](#), [178](#), [181](#), [193](#), [218](#), [243](#), [246](#), [249](#), [258](#)
"Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came," [170](#), [177](#)
"Christabel," [120](#), [129-30](#)
Churchill, Winston, [67](#)
City of God, The, [189](#)
Coleridge, Samuel Taylor: character of, [121-22](#), [128](#); conversations of, [118](#), [120](#), [122](#), [127-28](#); Dante and, [129](#); dreams and, [122-23](#); languages and, [123](#); life of, [118-21](#), [127-28](#), [133-34](#); Shakespeare and, [119](#), [123](#), [124-26](#), [233-34](#); Wordsworth and, [109-10](#), [115-16](#); works of, [110](#), [120](#), [121](#), [128-36](#)
Collins, William Wilkie, [162](#), [175](#)
"Composed upon Westminster Bridge," [112](#)
Conan Doyle, Arthur, [98](#)
Conversations of Goethe, [95](#)
"Coxon Fund, The," [118](#)
Crime and Punishment, [178](#)
Cromwell, Oliver, [65](#), [151](#)
Cynewulf, [43](#)

D

Damien, Father, [241](#)
Dante, [50](#), [54](#), [59](#), [129](#), [131](#), [137](#), [156](#), [179-81](#), [185](#), [213](#), [233](#)
Darío, Rubén, [137](#)
David Copperfield, [159](#), [163](#)
Decline of the West, The, [101](#)

Defence of Guenevere, The, [213](#), [224-26](#)
"Dejection: An Ode," [128](#)
"Deor's Lament," [52-53](#), [166](#)
De Quincey, Thomas, [110](#), [114](#), [119](#), [120](#), [121](#), [128](#),
[133](#), [146](#)
Dickens, Charles, [159-63](#), [164](#), [190](#)
Dictionary of the English Language, [73-75](#), [77](#)
Divine Comedy, The, [50](#), [61](#), [129](#), [131](#), [156](#), [180-81](#),
[233](#)
Dobrizhoffer, Martino, [119](#)
Doll's House, A, [159](#)
Don Quixote, [15](#), [95-96](#), [113](#), [114](#), [149](#)
Doré, Gustave, [131](#)
Dostoyevsky, Fyodor, [162](#), [178](#)
Double, theme of, [185](#)
Double Life, The, [241](#), [246](#)
"Dream of the Rood, The," [44](#), [46](#), [53-55](#)

E

Earthly Paradise, The, [218](#), [226](#), [229-33](#), [234](#)
Ebb-Tide, The, [250](#)
Eckermann, Johann Peter, [95](#)
"Eden Bower," [202-5](#)
Egil Skallagrímsson, [32](#)
Eiríkr Magnússon, [216](#), [234](#)
Elegies, Anglo-Saxon, [45-46](#), [48-53](#), [55](#)
Eliot, T. S., [53](#), [58](#), [162](#)
Emerson, Ralph Waldo, [109](#), [127](#)
English language, history of, [62-64](#), [70](#), [71](#)
Euclid, [114](#)
Evil, explanation of, [139-41](#)

F

Fabian Society, [215](#)

Fall of Robespierre, The, [120](#)
Farley, James Lewis, [66](#)
“Fears and Scruples,” [166-67](#), [176](#)
Fernández, Macedonio, [121-22](#)
Fingal, [104-5](#), [107](#)
Finnsburh Fragment, [8](#), [21-23](#), [24-27](#), 39
Flaubert, Gustave, [129](#)
Four Quartets, [58](#)
Fragments of Ancient Poetry Collected in the Highlands of Scotland, [103-4](#)
France, Anatole, [169](#)
“France: An Ode,” [128](#)
Francia, José Gaspar Rodríguez de, [151](#), [155](#)
Frederick the Great (king of Prussia), [155](#)
French Revolution, The, [151](#), [153](#)
Funeral rites, ancient, [10-11](#), [20](#)

G

Galland, Antoine, [82](#)
Garrick, David, [91](#)
George, Stefan, [51](#)
Germ, The, [182](#), [186](#)
Gibbon, Edward, [99](#)
Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, [95](#), [101](#), [105](#), [150-51](#), [154](#), [175](#)
Gordon, Robert K., [41](#), [61](#)
“Grave, The,” [61-62](#)
Gray, Thomas, [101](#), [106](#)
Groussac, Paul, [73](#), [126](#), [161](#)
Gwynn, Stephen, [243](#)

H

Hafiz, [43](#)
Hamlet, [179](#), [230](#)

Harald III (king of Norway), [65-67](#), [267](#)
Harold Godwinson (king of England), [65-69](#), [183](#), [267](#)
Harris, Frank, [125](#)
Hastings, Battle of, [64](#), [67-70](#), 266, 267
Heine, Heinrich, [68-69](#), [101](#)
Henley, W. E., [240-41](#), [246](#)
Herder, Johann Gottfried von, [101](#), [107](#)
Hernani, [101](#)
Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum, [41](#)
History, cyclic repetition of, [189-90](#)
History of Friedrich II of Prussia, [152](#), [156](#)
History of the Kings of Norway, [56](#)
Hoffman, E. T. A., [151](#)
Hölderlin, Friedrich, [101](#)
Homer, [91](#), [103](#), [105](#), [169](#), [171](#), [178-79](#)
House of Life, The, [185](#)
"How It Strikes a Contemporary," [167-68](#)
Hugo, Victor, [100](#), [101](#), [125-26](#), [138](#), [140](#), [148](#), [168](#),
[218](#)
Hume, David, [189](#)
Hung, William Holman, [182](#)
Huxley, Aldous, [142](#)

I

Ibsen, Henrik, [159](#)
Icelandic sagas, [217](#), [232-35](#)
"Idiot Boy, The," [115](#)
"I Have Been Here Before," [186](#), [190](#)
Iliad, the, [10](#), [17](#), [26](#), [85](#), [104](#), [179](#)
In Cold Blood, [124-25](#)
"Intimations of Immortality," [112](#), [114](#), [128](#)

J

James, Henry, [118](#), [130](#)

John Ball's Dream, [217-18](#)

Johnson, Samuel: appearance of, [72](#), [256](#); Boswell and, [90-91](#), [93-98](#), [106](#); Carlyle and, [73](#), [88-89](#), [154](#); character of, [86-87](#), [88-89](#); concept of literature held by, [77-78](#); conversations of, [95](#), [98](#), [106](#), [122](#); life of, [72-76](#), [88-90](#); Macpherson and, [106](#); works of, [72-73](#), [75-86](#), [94](#)

Jordanes, [20](#)

"Judith," [55](#)

Juvenal, [73](#)

K

Kafka, Franz, [176](#)

Kant, Immanuel, [121](#), [123-24](#), [152](#)

"Karshish," [168-69](#)

Keats, John, [100](#)

Kennings, [5-6](#)

Kierkegaard, Søren, [85-86](#)

King Lear, [125](#)

Kipling, Lockwood, [214-15](#)

Kipling, Rudyard, [18](#), [50](#), [90](#), [111](#), [243](#)

Krutch, Joseph Wood, [98](#)

"Kubla Khan," [120](#), [133-36](#)

L

Lamb, Charles, [119](#), [127-28](#)

Lang, Andrew, [162](#), [207](#), [213](#), [217-18](#)

Langland, William, [50](#), [70](#)

Leaves of Grass, [107](#), [111](#), [138](#), [158](#)

Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm, [84-85](#), [140](#)

Letters and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell, The, [151](#)

Life and Death of Jason, The, [233-34](#)

Life of Samuel Johnson, The, [95-96](#)

Lobo, Jerónimo, [72](#), [77](#)

"London," [73](#), [75](#)
Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth, [61-62](#)
Long Ships, The, [40-41](#)
"Love Among the Ruins," [173](#)
Lowes, John Livingston, [133](#)
Lugones, Leopoldo, [43](#), [63](#), [93](#), [239](#)
Lyrical Ballads, [110](#), [133](#)

M

Macaulay, Thomas, [87](#), [91-92](#), [150](#), [242](#)
Macbeth, [178](#), [230](#)
Macpherson, James, [101-7](#)
Mallarmé, Stéphane, [134](#)
Man and Superman, [146](#)
"Manitoba Childe Roland," [170](#)
Man Who Was Thursday, The, [246](#)
"Markheim," [246-48](#)
Marriage of Heaven and Hell, The, [145-46](#)
Martin Chuzzlewit, [162](#), [163](#)
Maugham, Somerset, [64](#)
"Memorabilia," [171-72](#)
Meredith, George, [166](#)
Mill, John Stuart, [151](#)
Milton, John, [59](#), [71](#), [90](#), [94](#), [109](#), [137](#), [138](#), [236](#), [242](#)
Miralla, José Antonio, [101](#)
"Mr. Sludge, the Medium," [170-71](#)
Moonstone, The, [162](#)
Moore, George, [123](#)
Morris, William: appearance of, [215-16](#); Chaucer and, [216](#), [229-31](#), [233](#); life of, [212-13](#), [214-17](#); Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and, [182](#); Rossetti and, [212](#), [217](#); Shaw and, [216](#); socialism and, [215](#), [217-18](#); translations by, [234-35](#); works of, [213](#), [217-34](#), [236-38](#)
Morte d'Arthur, Le, [182](#)
"My Last Duchess," [167](#)

Mystery of Edwin Drood, The, [162-63](#)

N

Napoleon Bonaparte, [105-6](#), [115](#), [155](#)

Nelson, Horatio, [133](#)

Nervo, Amado, [124](#)

New Arabian Nights, [240](#), [244-46](#)

News from Nowhere, [218](#)

Nietzsche, Friedrich, [63](#), [95](#), [145](#), [156](#), [189](#)

Nordau, Max, [193](#), [198](#)

"Nuptial Sleep," [187-88](#)

O

Odyssey, the, [10](#), [11](#), [59](#), [104](#), [234](#)

Oliver Twist, [162](#)

Orlando, [231](#)

Osbourne, Fanny, [240](#)

Ossian, invention of, [104-5](#)

Othón, Manuel José, [172](#)

Ovid, [229](#)

P

Palgrave, Francis, [23](#)

Paoli, Pasquale di, [90](#), [94](#)

Paradise Lost, [59](#), [71](#), [138](#), [236](#)

Percy, Thomas, [107](#)

Perfumed Garden, The, [158](#)

Pickwick Papers, The, [160](#), [163](#)

Pipa de Kif, La, [166](#)

Plato, [92](#), [142](#), [189](#)

Pliny the Elder, [59-60](#)

Poe, Edgar Allan, [43](#)

Pope, Alexander, [73](#), [94](#), [104](#), [137](#), [234](#)

Portrait of Dorian Gray, The, [248](#), [250](#)
Pound, Ezra, [46](#), [51](#), [116](#)
Prelude, The, [112-13](#)
Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, the, [182-83](#), [184](#), [212](#)
Priestley, John Boynton, [188-89](#), [190](#)
Purchas, Samuel, [133](#)
Pythagoras, [189](#), [190](#)

Q

Quevedo, Francisco de, [148](#)

R

"Rabbi Ben Ezra," [176-77](#)
Raphael, [182](#)
Rashomon, [173-74](#)
Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia, [76](#), [77-86](#)
Read, Herbert, [28](#)
Reading, as form of happiness, [253](#)
Reliques of Ancient Poetry, [106](#)
"Requiem," [250-51](#)
Reyes, Alfonso, [62](#), [81](#), [172](#)
Reynolds, Joshua, [95](#), [143](#)
Richter, Johann Paul, [150](#)
Riddles, [60](#)
Rilke, Rainer Maria, [114](#)
"Rime of the Ancient Mariner, The," [120](#), [121](#), [130-33](#),
[135](#), [186](#)
Ring and the Book, The, [165](#), [173-76](#), [178](#), [179](#)
Romantic movement, [100-101](#), [106-7](#), [137](#), [142](#)
Ronsard, Pierre de, [43](#)
Rossetti, Dante Gabriel: Browning and, [180](#), [183](#);
drawings and paintings of, [181-82](#), [184-86](#);
evaluation of, [181-82](#), [193](#); life of, [180-81](#), [184-87](#),
[212](#); Morris and, [212](#), [217](#)

Rousseau, Jean Jacques, [90](#), [94](#)
"Ruin, The," [46](#), [51-52](#), [173](#)
Runic letters, [43-45](#)
Ruskin, John, [184](#)

S

Saga of the Volsung, [236](#)
"Sailing of the Sword, The," [226-28](#)
Sandburg, Carl August, [111](#), [170](#)
Sartor Resartus, [88](#), [149](#), [151](#), [152-53](#), [156](#), [157](#)
Saurat, Denise, [138](#)
Schelling, Friedrich W. J. von, [121](#), [152](#)
Schiller, Friedrich von, [121](#), [150](#)
"Schlachtfeld bei Hastings," [68-69](#)
Schopenhauer, Arthur, [97](#)
Scotus Eriugena, Johannes, [104](#), [124](#), [180](#)
"Seafarer, The," [45-46](#), [49-50](#), [55](#)
Shakespeare, William: Browning and, [168](#), [173](#), [179](#);
Carlyle and, [230](#); Coleridge and, [119](#), [123](#), [124](#), [125-26](#), [233-34](#); cult of, [123](#), [125-26](#), [154](#); English
history and, [230](#); Johnson and, [75-76](#), [77](#), [88](#), [98](#);
Rossetti and, [183](#); Shaw and, [92](#); Woolf and, [231](#)
Shaw, George Bernard, [x392">91](#), [92-93](#), [124](#), [125](#),
[146](#), [215](#), 216
Shelley, Percy B., [171-72](#)
Sidney, Philip, [74](#)
Sigurd the Volsung, [217](#), [218](#), [226](#), [236-38](#)
Snorri Sturluson, [56](#), [66](#), [152](#)
Song of the Nibelungs, [236](#)
Songs of Experience, [139](#)
Songs of Innocence, [139](#)
Sonnets from Portuguese, [165](#)
Sorrows of Young Werther, The, [105](#)
Southey, Robert, [119](#), [120](#), [133](#)
Spengler, Oswald, [101](#)
Spinoza, Baruch, [97](#), [124](#), [125](#)

Stamford Bridge, Battle of, [65-67](#), [266](#)
Stephen, Leslie, [177](#)
Stevenson, Robert Louis: appearance of, [243](#); life of, [238-43](#); works of, [185](#), [238-40](#), [243-51](#)
Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, The, [239](#), [241](#), [248-50](#)
Swedenborg, Emmanuel, [137](#), [138](#), [141](#), [143-44](#), [171](#)
Swift, Jonathan, [140](#)
Swinburne, Algernon Charles, [50](#), [86](#), [148](#), [182](#), [184](#), [212](#)

T

Table Talk, [122](#)
Tacitus, [2](#), [78](#), [105](#)
Taillefer, [68](#)
"Tale of Paraguay, A," [119](#)
Tale of Two Cities, A, [159](#)
Tennyson, Alfred, [30](#), [33](#), [60](#), [128](#), [166](#), [214](#)
Thackeray, William Makepeace, [160-61](#), [182](#)
Thousand and One Nights, A, (Arabian Nights), [82](#), [160](#), [229-30](#), [232](#), [237](#), [240](#), [244](#)
Thus Spake Zarathustra, [63](#)
"Ticonderoga," [185](#)
"Time, Real and Imaginary," [128](#)
"To a Highland Girl," [114-15](#)
Tostig Godwinson, [65-67](#), [267](#)
Toynbee, Arnold, [99](#)
Treasure Island, [239](#), [240](#)
"Troy Town," [186](#), [205-11](#)
"Tune of Seven Towers, The," [224-26](#)
"Tyger, The," [139](#)

U

Unamuno, Miguel de, [95](#), [108](#), [116](#), [153](#), [161](#), [201](#)

V

Valéry, Paul, [94](#)
Valle Inclán, Ramón María del, [166](#)
Vallon, Annette, [108](#), [109](#)
“Vanity of Human Wishes, The,” [73](#)
Vikings, [27-30](#), [35-41](#), [55](#), [63](#)
Vita Nuova, La, [185](#)
Voices of the People, [107](#)
Voltaire, [76](#), [84](#), [86](#), [90](#), [94](#), [140](#)
Voyage to Abyssinia, A, [72](#), [77](#)

W

Wagner, Richard, [26](#), [133](#), [217](#)
“Wanderer, The” [51](#)
Ward, Maisie, [177](#)
Watchman, The, [120](#)
Webster, Noah, [75](#)
Welsh, Jane, [149](#), [156](#)
“Whale, The,” [58-59](#)
Whitehead, Alfred North, [135](#)
Whitman, Walt, [43](#), [45](#), [107](#), [111](#), [138](#), [148](#), [158](#)
Wilde, Eduardo, [61](#)
Wilde, Oscar, [166](#), [250](#)
William the Conqueror, [64](#), [68](#), [69](#), [155](#)
Woman in White, The, [162](#)
Woolf, Virginia, [124](#), [177](#), [231](#)
Wordsworth, William: Coleridge and, [109-10](#), [115-16](#);
 legacy of, [101](#), [116](#), [118](#); life of, [108-9](#), [119](#); theory
 of poetry held by, [110-12](#), [115-16](#), [182](#); works of,
 [104](#), [110](#), [112-15](#), [143](#)
Wrecker, The, [239](#), [240](#), [246](#)

Z

Zola, Emile, [100](#)

ALSO BY JORGE LUIS BORGES

Available from New Directions

Everything & Nothing

Labyrinths

Seven Nights

Copyright © 2000 by María Kodama
Copyright © 2000 by Martín Arias and Martín Hadis
Copyright © 2000 by Grupo Editorial SAIC
Copyright © 2013 by Katherine Silver

All rights reserved. Except for brief passages quoted in a newspaper, magazine, radio, television, or website review, no part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the Publisher.

This work was published with the generous support of “Sur” Translation Support Program of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Worship of the Argentina Republic. *Obra editada en el marco del Programa “Sur” de Apoya a las Traducciones del Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores y Culto de la República Argentina.*

PUBLISHERS NOTE: Martín Hadis offered valuable factual corrections to the English translation. Please visit www.martinhadis.com for a bibliography and additional supplementary material.

The Publisher wishes to thank Eliot Weinberger for his assistance in publishing this edition.

Book design by Sylvia Frezzolini Severance
First published as a New Directions Book in 2013.
Published simultaneously in Canada by Penguin Books Canada Limited.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Borges, Jorge Luis, 1899-1986.

[Borges profesor. English]

Professor Borges : a course on English literature /
Jorge Luis Borges ; edited, with an introduction and
afterwords, by Martín Arias and Martín Hadis ;
translated from the Spanish by Katherine Silver.

pages cm

Includes index.

A compilation of the twenty-five lectures Borges
gave in 1966 at the

University of Buenos Aires, where he taught
English literature.

eISBN 978-0-8112-2117-7

1. English literature—Study and teaching (Higher)
—Argentina—Buenos Aires. 2. Borges, Jorge Luis, 1899-
1986—Knowledge—Literature. 3. English literature—
History and criticism. 4. Universidad de Buenos Aires.
5. Borges, Jorge Luis, 189-1986—Translations into
English. I. Arias, Martín, 1970- editor. II. Hadis, Martín,
1971- editor. III. Silver, Katherine, translator. IV. Title.
V. Title: Course on English literature.

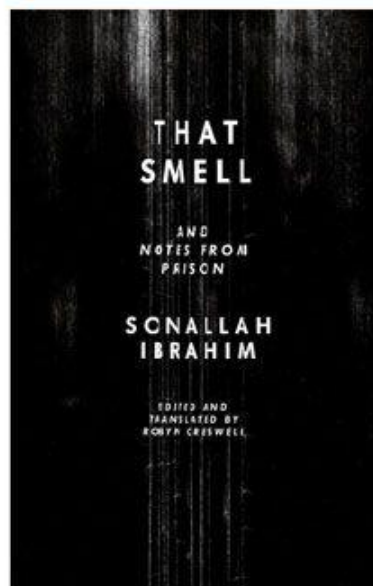
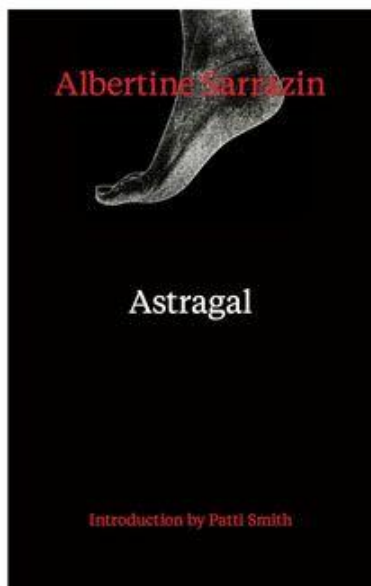
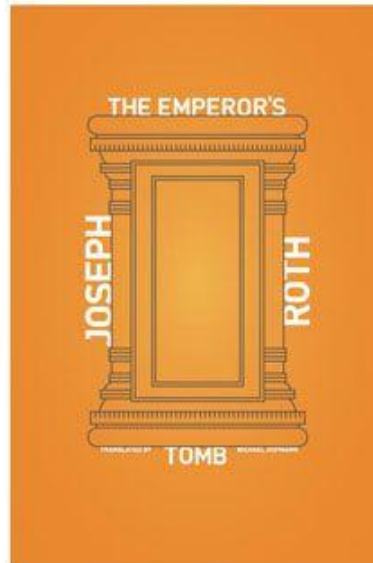
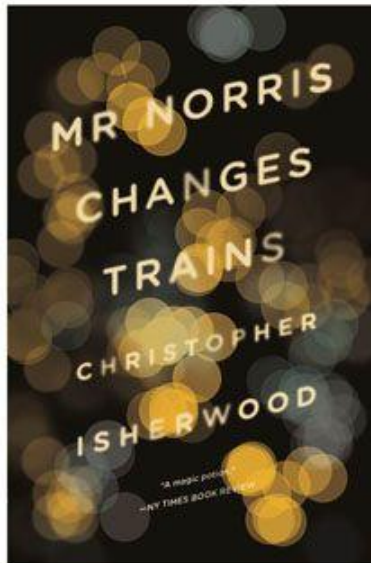
PR51.A7B6713 2013

820.9—dc23

2012050163

New Directions Books are published for James Laughlin
by New Directions Publishing Corporation
80 Eighth Avenue, New York 10011

RECENT RELEASES
NOW AVAILABLE AS EBOOKS



CELEBRATING OVER 75 YEARS
OF INDEPENDENT PUBLISHING
www.ndbooks.com